

Critical Acclaim for *Sextet*

'This is a novel with a split personality, part dizzy romance, part dark whodunnit, a magical mystery tour of the hearts and minds of a very mixed bunch of people as their paths criss-cross from London to New York via Oxfordshire and Yorkshire . . .

Beauman spins heaps of seductive, dreamlike magic to weave the strands into a pacy, racy, mystical story where no conclusion is foregone'

The Times

'A thriller which knocks you for six . . . [A] peach of a novel . . . The artful Sally Beauman plays extremely clever games with the staples of popular fiction, moving the pieces to make original and intriguing patterns . . . *Sextet* is a hugely entertaining read, seriously romantic and with a terrific sense of atmosphere. Sally Beauman's control of her complex material is absolute. She is an excellent craftsman.'

Kate Saunders, *Daily Express*

'Beauman's better than ever in this sexy, yet romantic thriller . . . A thoroughly entertaining romantic thriller that mixes a believable, touching love story and genuine thrills in equal measure . . . A complex cracker of a plot with vivid characters and atmospheric locations, sexy [and] stylishly written - Miss Beauman carries it all off with great panache'

Good Housekeeping

'An accomplished thriller [with a] chilling conclusion'

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Lovers and Liars

Danger Zones

SEXTET

Sally Beauman



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or Alexander Mackinnon
fear iouíl gasda, caraid
asda, agus duine gasda.

There are terrible spirits, ghosts, in the air of America.

D. H. Lawrence, *Edgar Allan Poe*, 1924

Hippolyta: 'Tis strange, my Theseus, that these
lovers speak of.

Theseus: More strange than true: I never may
believe
These antique fables, nor these fairy toys,
Lovers and madmen have such seething
brains,
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
More than cool reason ever
comprehends . . .
Such tricks hath strong imagination,
That if it would but apprehend some joy,
It comprehends some bringer of that joy;
Or in the night, imagining some fear,
How easy is a bush supposed a bear.

Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

SEXTET

INTERVIEW

I

Was she afraid or not afraid? The interview was drawing to a close; from outside the theatre dressing-room, where it was taking place, came the murmur of traffic and the wash of rain; it was early afternoon, yet the light was already beginning to fade.

Across the room from her interviewer, both women seated on hard upright chairs, the actress Natasha Lawrence was positioned with her back to her dressing-table and its mirrors, which reflected her in triplicate. She was leaning forward a little, hands clasped in her lap, answering a question about her work. She did so in a low, somewhat hesitant voice, which, mingling with the sound of rain and the faint purr of a humidifier, had a lulling effect. Was she afraid? This question, and most of the other questions her interviewer, Gini Hunter, would have liked to ask, had not been, and apparently could not be, voiced.

This interview, like many Gini had conducted in the past, had been hedged around with restrictions from the first. For the past year, Natasha Lawrence had been playing the title role in *Estella*, a musical by a celebrated English composer which had been a *succès fou* in London, and was now a *succès fou* in New York. The musical was based on Dickens's *Great Expectations*, and adjustments had been made to the novel. The part of Estella, that lovely poisonous child, trained up by mad Miss Havisham to break men's hearts, was given greater prominence in the musical than in the book. There had been surprise when Natasha Lawrence took this role --

her first singing role – for her fame was as a movie actress. Confounding the critics, however, she had proved to have a powerful, true, sweet singing voice. This, combined with her acting ability, never in doubt, had helped to turn *Estella* into a triumph. Gini Hunter, an agnostic where musicals were concerned, admired Lawrence's performance, but retained a strong preference for the original novel; this preference, obviously, she had been careful not to express.

Now, after nearly a year of eight performances a week at the Minskoff theatre, an exhausting and demanding schedule, Natasha Lawrence was leaving the show. She was being replaced by a slightly less famous name, and the rumour was that bookings were beginning to fall. Natasha Lawrence was returning to film work specifically to a movie directed by her former husband, Thomas Court; this movie, Gini gathered, was to be shown in England – and beyond that would not be discussed. She was here, for *The New York Times*, at the behest of an editor friend there. She would interview Natasha Lawrence as she prepared to leave the cast of *Estella*. That, at least, was the reason for the interview, or its ostensible reason, given to the collection of press agents, PR representatives, secretaries and aides who stood between Natasha Lawrence and the outside world; the true reason behind the decision to run the piece was rather different – as, in Gini's experience, was usually the case. 'I hear talk,' said Gini's editor friend, a young man whose reputation was rising fast; so fast was he rising that he had to mention span difficulties; one of his eyes, Gini always noticed, was permanently fixed on what he was going to do next. He was playing with rubber bands, a quirk of his.

'Talk, talk, talk,' he amplified, flicking a band and changing it. 'Talk about the ex-husband, for a start, white of American movies et cetera et cetera – but a handsome man, by all accounts. Why the divorce? They

still work together. I find that weird. Don't you find that weird? I can tell you, I wouldn't get on the same *airplane* as my ex-wife.'

He paused; he toyed with deflecting to the subject of his own marital sufferings – a favoured topic – eyed Gini and changed his mind.

'Talk about the *bodyguards*,' he continued, putting a bracelet of rubber bands about his wrist. 'Never moves a step without them, I hear. Why? Your common or garden Hollywood paranoia, d'you think, or more than that? Is she afraid? If so, of whom? Of what?'

Gini sighed. 'I'll ask,' she said. 'I don't expect an answer. Do you?'

'You never know.' The rising young man gave her an evasive look. He was already losing interest. *But* his attention was returning to the man he would be tomorrow, or the day after that. 'The Conrad' he said, surprising Gini. 'I hear she's after an apartment in the Conrad building. Why? Prestige? Security? She won't get it, of course. She has about as much chance of moving in there as I have of moving into the White House...' He paused. 'Less.'

Gini agreed with this. The Conrad building, once described as the East Side's answer to the Dakota – a description that applied to its architecture, not its residents – was well known as one of the most *exclusive*, conservative strongholds in New York. *One* could not pass it without imagining fortifications: *barbed* walls, a drawbridge. The Conrad, a *bastion*, was the kind of building that admitted *admirable*, *partially* beautiful, still-young, divorced actresses with a *child* – Natasha Lawrence had a boy, aged six or seven. *She* would have to check, from her marriage to *Tommy* *Lawrence*.

'You want me to ask her about the Conrad?' Gini said. 'She's even less likely to discuss that *anything* else?'

'A little glimpse of her soul,' *Tommy* *Lawrence*.

was not without wit or charm; he smiled. 'Come on, Gini, you know. Insights. Insights. Who she truly is. What makes her tick . . .'

Gini gave him a look. She rose. 'How many words?' she said.

'Fifteen hundred.' The young man removed the rubber wristbands, tossed them up and caught them – a neat trick.

'How many words?' Gini repeated.

'Oh, all right. Thirteen hundred. Thirteen-fifty max.'

'Fine. You want the glimpse of soul in my lead paragraph, or can I save it for the close? Thirteen hundred words gives me a whole lot of choice.'

'Now, Gini, don't be humorous,' the young man said.

'Why not? This is a farce.'

'True. True. How long have you got with her?'

'One hour. In her dressing-room.'

'Ah, well.' The editor shrugged. 'Maybe she'll open her heart to you even so . . .'

'And if she doesn't? Which she won't.'

'Then we run the picture bigger,' he replied with a yawn. 'What else?'

In the quiet of the dressing-room now, the actress was continuing to speak in that low, lulling voice. The humidifier purred; every so often, its machinery underwent some minor galvanic disturbance; it would whirr and click, send out a sudden puff of water vapour, then revert to its steady background steaming. The actress was answering a question Gini had asked her about the most famous of the movies she had made with her husband, *Dead Heat*. That movie had been controversial, to say the least; Natasha Lawrence spoke of it in a measured, intelligent but impersonal way, as if it had been directed by a stranger and the leading part had been played, not by herself, but by someone else. Gini glanced towards her tape recorder, which was

patiently recording this answer; most of the answer was unusable for journalistic purposes, and Gini suspected Natasha Lawrence knew that. She glanced at her watch; she had less than ten minutes left. It occurred to her that Lawrence, who had controlled the circumstances of this interview from the first, was still controlling it.

'No personal questions,' the press agent handling all publicity for *Estella* had said. That stricture had been repeated by the others who formed a protective shield between Lawrence and the outside world, as, over the weeks leading up to the interview, its date, time and location had constantly been unpicked and restitched. It had been reiterated finally, the previous day, by a deep-voiced and heavily accented woman named Angelica, the dragon-woman who was Natasha Lawrence's chief guardian – or so other journalists said.

Angelica's role was part domestic, part managerial, part protective, said these sources, advising Gini to stay well out of her way. Angelica, officially, was nanny and caretaker to the actress's son; unofficially, she was caretaker also to the actress herself.

'No personal questions,' she had rasped down the telephone to Gini. 'You've got that? No questions about her son, or her marriage, or her divorce, or Tomas Court. And don't think you'll be able to wait a while and then feed them in when your tape's switched off. You have one hour. In that hour, you can ask her about her movies, or her stage work, or *Estella*; she's there to talk about her *work* and nothing else. She has to conserve her energy, and her voice. It's demanding, playing an eight-performance week. You're lucky to be seeing her at all – and if I had my way, you wouldn't be. So those are the terms, and don't imagine you can ingratiate yourself and alter them once you're in there. She won't fall for *that*.'

Indeed she would not, Gini thought, looking at the actress, who, gentle in appearance, and gentle-voiced,



Across the room, lined up on a shelf, was a lustrous row of *Estella* wigs. Next to them, hanging from a rail and protected by a white sheet, were the various costumes Lawrence wore as Estella, including that crucial child's first-act white dress. They had a patient air, the costumes, Gini thought, as if waiting for the actress to inhabit and vivify them. That slippery white organza was like a chrysalis, waiting for the lovely poisonous butterfly Estella to hatch.

Could you play a character like Estella, Gini wondered, a woman trained up from her earliest youth to break men's hearts, unless somewhere within you, you had the germ of such characteristics yourself? Estella, after all, was the embodiment of poor, mad, jilted Mr. Havisham's revenge on the male sex, and spiritual murder was her intent. Could you play such a woman or indeed the strange ambivalent women Lawrence had played in her former husband's movies, without being able to imagine them? And could you imagine them if you did not, inside the husk of the psyche, containing some little seed which, given the right soil, water and nutrients, might have made you into such a woman yourself?

She did not know the answer to that question, which applied, she supposed in passing, to other women besides actresses. She would have liked to ask it, but could think of no way of posing it which would not sound banal or trite.

She had less than five minutes left. She turned back to the actress and looked at her carefully as she continued to speak. Famous though she was, a physical description of her would be necessary for this article and Lawrence was not easy to describe: beauty never was. She was wearing a very plain, dark dress; the three mirrors behind her on the dressing-table framed her lovely head. The two outer mirrors of this trinity each

Gini put the tape recorder in her bag and rose. Quite suddenly, she found she was tired of this; she could not wait for this meeting to be over, to leave the theatre. Interviews were supposed to elicit information, yet this type of interview rarely did; for this failing, rightly or wrongly, she blamed the assumptions and procedures of the interview process, not herself. After an hour's conversation, she had obtained perhaps three or four remarks which she could weave into her profile of the actress efficiently enough; the resulting article would tell readers something and nothing, she thought.

She looked at the actress, who was about to open the dressing-room door, and for the sake of her rising young editor, tossed in one final question, expecting no reply.

'Is it true you're considering moving to the Conrad building?' she said.

To her astonishment, the actress showed greater animation at this than she had done throughout the interview. She smiled, then laughed.

'How do these stories start?' she said. 'The Conrad? I don't think they'd welcome me with open arms, do you? No, I'm moving back to California. I've bought a house in the hills outside Hollywood. It's being decorated for me by . . .' And she mentioned a fashionable West Coast name; she gave a small sigh. 'It's due to be finished this week, so as soon as I finish in *Estella* . . .'

'Can I use that?'

'Yes. It's no secret I'm going back to California. I'm sorry, but the hour is up . . .'

She held out her hand and took Gini's briefly in her own. Some polite farewell was expressed; Gini was reminded of the final prearranged conditions of this interview: that a copy of the article should be made available in advance of publication, so that the accuracy of the facts – and *only* the facts, the actress said with another smile – could be checked. Then she found herself outside in the corridor with the door firmly shut.

Gini negotiated the labyrinthine backstage corridor faint with a residual scent of make-up, hair lacquer, disinfectant and sweat. She came out into the alleyway that led down to the stage door; it was still raining and Manhattan had not yet emerged from the day's permanent dusk. She was taking the shuttle back to Washington DC, where her husband Pascal and the baby son awaited her. It was Hallowe'en, and – the interview already receding from her mind – she was anxious to be back. She walked towards Times Square, the bluish exhaust-heavy air pungent with the smells of a city winter, of pretzels and of chestnuts roasting at some corner ahead. She tried to hold on to her interview as she hailed a yellow cab and persuaded its driver, a driver of desperate, demented appearance, who spoke virtually no English, to take her out now, yes now, to the airport.

In the cab, she flicked open her notebook, where during the course of the interview, she had jotted down a few comments. She closed it again, leaned forward and began to give the driver instructions as to the best route, instructions which he seemed unable to understand or unwilling to accept. Her mind curled away from the dressing-room and the interview to the journey ahead: a plane, then another taxi, the familiar streets of Georgetown, brick pavements, décorum, and her husband and son waiting for her in her dead father's house.

It curled back, back like a wave, to her father's funeral a month before; to the visits to the last of the clinics that had preceded that funeral; to the stations on the way to the end – and the end, inevitable for all men, had been hastened in his case. Two bottles of bourbon a day for twenty years; promise and talent allowed to leach out of none of the scenes of reconciliation which she had believed must surely happen in those final weeks. Her father had lived angrily and died angrily, and now all that remained, in every sense, was to clear up.

She could feel it mounting, block by block as they drove, some strange female need to dust, scrub, polish, sweep; some need to spring-clean a house that was about to be sold, and clean away the thirty-one years of her accumulated memories. Then she, Pascal and their beautiful son, whom she loved with a painful intensity, would be free to leave. They could leave Washington behind and go in any direction they chose. The whole of America lay before them: east, west, north, south. Should they begin with the clean trading air of the eastern seaboard, or head for the plantations, the Spanish moss, of an imagined but never visited deep south?

She looked forward to an hour, two hours, with her son when she returned. He was still too young to understand Hallowe'en, but she and Pascal had made a gesture towards the date. The previous evening they had hollowed out a fat orange globe of a pumpkin. They had given it round eyes, a triangular nose and a wide, smiling, unthreatening mouth. This pumpkin, lit from inside by a candle, would be placed in the window to welcome her home; it would greet the children who came to the door for trick or treat. Thus far and no farther, would she go to acknowledge the date she wanted to begin giving her son Lucien the childhood she had never had, but she was too recently bereaved - ~~a bereaved~~ was the term - to wish to celebrate more fully the things of the dead.

So the pumpkin would glow, her son would be persuaded eventually that the purpose of being born in his little red cot was to sleep. Then there was the long tranquillity of an evening with her husband to look forward to. They would make their plans for Thanksgiving - her friend Lindsay Drummond would be coming from England to celebrate it with them - and then it would

'Has the package come from Tomas?' she said to Angelica, as she entered the apartment, pulling off her coat.

'No, but he called. He's sending it to the theatre by courier; it'll be there when you go in tonight.'

'Ah,' Natasha said, looking at Angelica and taking the pile of letters and packages she held out. She looked down at these in a nervous way; Angelica sighed.

'It's all right,' she said. 'Nothing from *him*. I checked. And no calls either . . .'

Faint colour rose in Natasha's cheeks; hope lit in her eyes. She glanced over her shoulder at her son, who had looked up from his book. He knew better than to ask questions, or greet his mother at this point; he bent to the pages of *Treasure Island* again. Angelica lowered her voice.

'It's been four months now. Nothing for four months.'

'I know.'

'He's never been silent for this long before.'

'I know.'

'Maybe he's dead.' Angelica lowered her voice still further. 'Could be. Hit by a truck, jumped off a bridge, sank a bottle of Temazepam, prowled about too late one night in the wrong place. It happens all the time . . .'

'To other people, yes.'

'I dreamed he died. I told you. I dreamed it just the other night.'

'Ah, Angelica.'

Angelica placed great faith in her dreams, which were often dark and occasionally malevolent. Natasha Lawrence might have liked to place equal faith in her dreams, but she had learned from experience, and now did not. Angelica's dreams often inverted or reversed truths, and sometimes – like most dreamers – she allowed her own desires to write her dream scripts. The actress looked at her husband, and

down, and you can hear him coming with his stic tap, tap . . .'

His mother straightened up a little hastily and a small sign to Angelica. 'I'm sure I remember said. 'Blind Pew comes to a nasty end. He gets h deserts . . .'

'That's what Daddy said.'

'Shall we have our tea, darling – our Hallowe'en She glanced at her watch. 'I want to do that before arrives to give me my massage, then you could this special costume you've made and show me – too. Let's have tea now. Angelica's found a Hallowe'en cake . . .'

The cake was in the shape of a witch; she was mo on a broomstick, flying over a white-icing moon, th a milky chocolate sky. Jonathan's excitement at th at dressing up in his Hallowe'en costume, touch mother deeply. She looked at her son, who was for his age, and who had a small, somewhat mela face – an expressive face, a little clown's face – a innocence pained her. At seven, carefully protect nurtured, her son still did not understand how u this Hallowe'en was. He would not, like other ch be going out to play trick or treat. His one exc watched over by Angelica, would be down the an elderly guest at the Carlyle who had grown f him and who was known to be safe. He would here, have his costume admired by Maria, and when his mother left for the theatre, would watch Disney video with Angelica, while a bodygua always, stayed within reach. Her son was a prisc her fame and his father's fame, and a prisoner of people, and those forces, that such fame could at

This thought, as always, she tried to push aside months of silence, she said to herself. She tried h

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dressing-room, and there waiting for her, as promised – but Tomas Court always kept his promises – was the package her former husband had sent.

It was contained inside a padded envelope, then wrapped again in thick brown paper, on which, in Tomas's cursive script, was the name 'Helen'. She turned it this way and that, then unsealed the wrappings. Inside, as she had expected, was a copy of a novel, and inside the leaves of the book was her surprise – a tiny clipping from a Montana newspaper, dated earlier that week.

Her hands began to shake; the print blurred before her eyes. She read the story, which concerned the discovery of a body in the Glacier National Park, three times. Indeed, Tomas could have given her no better present than this. Nevertheless, lighting a match and watching the scrap of newsprint flare, she destroyed her present at once. She crumbled the dust in her fingers, then washed her hands and began the process of making up her Estella face.

By the time her dresser arrived, she was – as always before a performance – quiet and concentrated. Her dresser, an androgynous young man, hired at her behest, who always dressed her for all her theatre work, was adept at making himself invisible. He helped her into the white organdie of her first-scene dress. For this act of the musical, in which Estella was still a child, no wigs were needed, and Natasha Lawrence preferred to arrange her hair herself. The invisible young man quietly withdrew; he returned only when the half was called, as he always did.

He paused in the doorway, for the alchemy of the past half-hour never ceased to fascinate him. The dressing-room had been occupied by a woman – now a child, a wilful child, occupied it. He looked at the triplicate reflections of this child in the mirrors; the child applied one last pink stroke of colour to her lips; the tannoy crackled, the humidifier puffed.

'They've called the half, Ms Lawrence. Can I fetch you anything?' he asked, as he always did.

He knew the answer would be a haughty impatient 'No', and he knew it would be made in the imperious English voice of Estella. The invisible young man, a romantic about the acting process, liked this transformation, this switch into character. Occasionally, boasting to his friends of the insights his work afforded him, he would also boast of this. He waited; he sniffed; faintly, through the humid air, he thought he could smell burning, an acrid scent.

'Some water. A little honey. My throat's tight,' the actress replied, in her usual voice.

The young man, surprised, fetched them with alacrity. He felt uneasy at this departure from tradition, but his unease proved unfounded. It was agreed by the entire cast, and all the stagehands, that for some reason, Natasha Lawrence's performance was especially electrifying that night.

HALLOWE'EN

II

The party was being held on Hallowe'en to celebrate a film; possibly the completion of a film, or its launch, possibly the clinching of some deal in connection with a film. The photographer, Steve Markov, who wangled the invitation for Lindsay Drummond, inclined to the latter view. 'Money,' he said, holding up the somewhat peculiar invitation card hand-delivered to Lindsay's London apartment. He sniffed it in a theatrical manner. 'I smell money. A co-production deal? Subsidiary rights? Video release in Venezuela?'

He smiled one of his fugitive mocking smiles. Lindsay regarded him warily. Markov was one of her oldest friends, but his superabundant energy tended at times to swamp her. In the past, other friends, in particular Gini Hunter, had mitigated Markov's influence. But Gini's departure to Washington DC had left her unprotected, fighting some lonely rearguard action. Markov was currently conducting an energetic campaign to alter her life – he described it as *sad*; she suspected the peculiar invitation card was part of these manoeuvrings. Having smiled, adjusted the dark glasses he permanently wore, and stretched back against the cushions of her sofa, he confirmed this.

'You have to go, Lindy,' he went on, more firmly. 'I'm going. Jippy's going. You should go. "*Nel mezzo del cammin*," my best beloved. Get a life.'

'I detest that phrase,' Lindsay replied, turning the invitation card this way and that. 'That phrase is glib. That phrase is cant.'

Diablo, sweetheart, is the name of Tomas Court's new production company, and Tomas Court, white hope of American movies, is going to be *at* this party, Lindy, my dear. In person. Himself. Or so Lulu claims, Lulu not being one thousand per cent reliable, of course.'

Lindsay digested this information. She had her pride. 'Markov,' she said firmly. 'I have no intention of going to this party.'

'You're intrigued; admit you're intrigued. Lulu's hooked you. I knew she would.'

'The hell she has. Lulu? That has to be the silliest name I've heard in years . . .'

'She used to be called Pandora . . .'

'That doesn't make it better, it makes it worse. Markov, I don't go to this kind of party on principle. Life's too short.'

This remark, as Lindsay instantly realized, was a mistake. A smile curled around Markov's lips. He finished his post-lunch coffee, then made his conversational pounce.

'Do you want to change your life, or not?' he began. 'Because I seem to remember, honeychild, that last month, or like the month before *that*, you said—'

'I can remember what I said.'

Lindsay hastily rose to her feet. She edged across to the window and looked down at her familiar London street. Leaves whirled in an autumnal wind; the sun shone; the weather had an optimistic look. Backing away from the window, she thumped a cushion or two into place, tidied up the already tidy pile of Sunday newspapers, surveyed the detritus of the lunch table, fetched the coffee pot, and poured herself another cup of coffee she would not drink.

She had hoped that one of these aimless activities might deflect Markov; none did. With buzz-saw determination, he stuck to the point.

'Age was mentioned,' he was continuing, still with that maddening smile on his face. 'Career was mentioned. Domicile was mentioned. I suspect the term "empty-nest syndrome" came up . . .'

Lindsay gave a groan. One of Markov's least pleasant traits was his perfect recall of past conversations. Could she actually have used that trite phrase 'empty nest'? Surely she had not sunk as low as 'syndrome'?

'I was drunk,' she said. 'If I said that, which I doubt I must have been drunk. It doesn't count.'

'Bad news, sweetheart. You were stone cold sober . . .' Markov paused. 'Angry, though. Fierce. You positively trembled with resolution. I was moved, Lindy. I was impressed . . .'

'Will you stop this?'

'"I am sick of being a fashion editor" – that's what you said. "I am sick of the fashion world." You were going to talk to that editor of yours. Have you talked to that editor of yours?'

'What, Max? No, not yet.'

'Fresh woods and pastures new – you quoted that.'

Markov gave a sigh that was very nearly as theatrical as his usual mode of speech. 'Darling, you were having lunch with some publisher man. A contract was being dangled. This publisher man – a very big wheel – wanted a book on Coco Chanel. You, Lindy, were going to write that book. It was going to be definitive. It was going to make you poor, but never mind that. Has this lunch with the big cheese of British publishing actually happened?'

'No, I postponed it. I need time to think.'

'And then there was the real-estate agent . . .' The buzz-saw hit a higher pitch. 'This guy had two firm potential buyers for this apartment. He was promising a bidding war. He pointed out that this is now a highly desirable area of London, so if you sold, you'd make profit. Not a large profit, I admit, but just enough to buy, or rent, a small hovel somewhere outside London'

in the sticks. In this hovel, you, Lindy, were going to commune with nature. A dog was mentioned, and a cat. Ducks featured, as, I'm afraid, did chickens . . . '

'I never mentioned chickens.'

'Oh yes, you did - at length. Lindy, I can see this hovel now; it had a wood fire, patchwork quilts. In it, serene, scholarly and alone, you wrote your book . . . '

'So? It was just an *idea*.'

'It was never-never land, Lindy. Face facts.'

'I've had a few set-backs, that's all. That estate agent was fired. I haven't had time to look at any hovels yet, but I'm going to. I . . . '

'And when you described this idyll, Lindy, was I unkind? No, I was not; I was encouraging, patient. And why? Because I knew the *real* reason behind this sudden desire to up sticks and change your life . . . '

'Will you stop this? Markov, that's *enough* . . . '

Lindsay sank her head in her hands. She was beginning to regret, deeply regret, having asked Markov and his lover Jippy to Sunday lunch. She had done so partly because she was fond of them both, partly because they happened to be in London, and mainly because Sunday, that family day, was now the hardest, the loneliest, the most interminable day of the week.

With a sigh, she raised her head and inspected her pleasant and familiar sitting-room. This apartment had been her home for eighteen years; formerly, it had been occupied by Lindsay, her son Tom, and her difficult mother, Louise. Now difficult Louise, astonishingly, had remarried and moved out; Tom was in his second year reading Modern History at Oxford. Thanks to their absence, the room was depressingly tidy. Markov and his friend Jippy, who was sitting beside him, but remaining silent as always, would soon be leaving: then the apartment would also be depressingly quiet. Lindsay feared this.

years ago, I thought we could bring him around, make him see sense. I put a lot of time and energy into that project, Lindy, if you remember . . .’

‘I do remember. Much good it did.’

‘Precisely. *Nada*. Zilch. So the time has come, Lindy, my love, to cut your losses. You have to hitch a ride, darling, to a different city on the highway of life . . .’

‘Markov, *please*. Give me a *break*.’

‘And you have to leave that son of a bitch behind in the parking lot. Am I right or am I right?’

‘You’re right, and he isn’t a son of a bitch; he’s good, he’s kind, he’s clever, he’s handsome, he’s nice.’

‘He’s *blind*.’ Markov became stern. ‘What you need, Lindy, is some McGuire antibiotic . . .’

‘I *know* that. I’m administering it. I’m in mid-cure ight now . . .’

‘You are? And when does this cure cease?’

‘The end of the month. This month. I’ve set myself a deadline, Markov. Truly . . .’

This reply, forced out of her, was another mistake – as Lindsay almost immediately realized. A crafty little smile curled about Markov’s lips. Next to him, the silent and gentle Jippy gave a sigh. His eyes fell on the pink mirror-writing invitation card, abandoned on a table. Markov at once picked it up.

‘This party’, he said, with emphasis, ‘takes place on the last day of this month. All the more reason to go. You can celebrate your new-won freedom, for a start. You can meet new people, make new friends and kick-start your new improved McGuireless life.’

‘Thanks, but no thanks.’

Lindsay took the proffered card and tucked it back in the pocket of Markov’s chartreuse-coloured jacket. Then, since she knew that beneath Markov’s affectations of speech and dress, his intentions were kindly, she patted the pocket and gave him an affectionate kiss on the cheek.

could look older, considerably older – as if he had been around for centuries, Markov said.

Unlike Markov, who was flamboyant, Jippy cultivated anonymity of dress. Today, as usual, he was wearing clean, pressed blue jeans, a navy-blue sweater which a schoolboy might have worn, and a white shirt. His old-fashioned lace-up shoes were smartly polished, and, in a way Lindsay found heart-breakingly sad, he always looked spruced up, as if for a job interview – his expression, shy and somewhat hopeful, dogged but melancholy, suggesting it was a job Jippy was never going to get. He would have passed in a crowd without anyone's giving him a second glance – indeed, Lindsay suspected that he preferred and intended this – but on closer inspection, he conveyed a powerful and disconcerting benevolence. Quite how he did this, Lindsay could not have said, since the benevolence seemed to radiate from him, without visible source, unless it be his eyes, the gaze of which was steady, as if expecting the best in others, and yet sorrowful – or so Lindsay thought.

Jippy's origins were in many ways obscure: Lindsay had never discovered his true name, where he lived or what he did before meeting Markov, or indeed how they had met. His ancestry, however, was for some reason elaborately exact. He was one half Belorussian, one quarter Armenian, one eighth British and one eighth Greek – on this issue, Jippy was emphatic, even pedantic. He was Markov's photographic assistant as well as his lover, and according to Markov, he was a genius of the darkroom, indispensable to Markov's latest experiments with silver and platinum prints. Lindsay knew virtually nothing else about him, except for one key piece of information, which, true, or untrue, Markov always stressed. He claimed that, from the Armenian grandmother, Jippy had inherited second sight.

held in some Dockland's loft, in a part of London she knew well, having once worked for a newspaper whose grim and fortified offices lay very close to this venue in Wapping. It was miles from where she lived, in Notting Hill Gate; she was sure to get lost in those eerie ill-lit riverside streets. It would be dark; it would be Hallowe'en; she would almost certainly have to park miles away and then venture past gloomy wharves, threatening alleyways, at the end of which, by mud and slippery, weedy steps, the Thames sucked and washed

. She gave a small involuntary shiver. 'I know you both mean well,' she began, 'but I *really* don't want to go. It's a Friday; I have to go to Oxford to see Tom that weekend. It's just before the New York collections, so I'll be getting ready for New York and I'll have a mountain of work . . .'

Jippy made a gesture, a tiny, quick motion of the hand. He patted her arm and smiled, and began to lead Markov towards the door.

'S-see how you feel,' he said, 'on the n-night.'

'Oh, all right, I'll think about it,' Lindsay conceded, 'if you both promise to go to it too. Markov, you might as well leave the invitation . . .'

Jippy smiled broadly. Markov smiled broadly.

'In your left pocket, I think you'll find, Lindy,' Markov said, opening her front door, exiting fast and shutting it with a smart click.

Lindsay had forgotten Jippy's other skills: his sleight of hand, his conjuring tricks, his ability to convey solid matter from that place of concealment to this. She put her hand disbelievingly into the pocket of her jacket. It closed over the pink, mirror-writing invitation to a party. She still had no intention of going, she told herself, and over the next two intervening weeks she constantly reminded herself of this.

The two weeks were active ones. During them, she

he noted, fought a brief battle for possession of this prize in the middle of the street.

Then, over an hour and a half late, and thoroughly rattled, she set off in her small car eastwards. Lindsay was a bad driver, and her sense of direction was dysfunctional. This fact had often been remarked upon, amiably and laconically, by Rowland McGuire. Even in his absence, Lindsay was determined to prove him wrong. She failed; as she had predicted, she lost herself in the dark streets of Docklands almost at once.

This entire, huge, confusing loft space, with a bewilderingment of metal stairways; jutting, galleried upper decks; dark archways which might lead somewhere or nowhere, was lit by candles. In the centre of the deck, or floor, was a lipstick-coloured couch, to which party-goers clung like a life-raft, and thrumming up through her feet, she could sense some mysterious energy, like the power of a whirring turbine, buried deep in the bowels of a ship. The throb and pulse of this power source had a propulsive effect. Lindsay felt it was propelling her through the dark and the smoke to some vital but as yet undisclosed destination. She felt she would surely arrive somewhere eventually, but meanwhile she felt unstable not too sure of her balance, and faintly sea-sick.

She peered up at the landmark of the tall Dracula man. He had just avoided being speared by his fa neighbour's cocktail stick and was looking down at Lindsay with a mad desperation.

'I can't *hear*,' he shouted. 'You cannot hear a goddamn thing in here . . .'

'The *Thames*,' Lindsay yelled, with equal desperation. 'I said, this place is very hard to find, isn't it? I nearly drove into the Thames twice . . .'

The pale man, she perceived, was not interested in this. He was not interested in Lindsay either, but - hedging his bets - he was not yet prepared to be uninterested. She could already see that he had an acute case of party squint, partly caused by alcohol, she suspected, but also caused by visual dilemmas.

It was not easy to keep one eye perpetually on the entrance doors, in case *someone* came in, while keeping the other eye on two hundred guests, all of whom kept milling back and forth, and any one of whom might be (several certainly were) *someone* as well. Nor was he prepared to cast off Lindsay yet; she too, after all, might turn out to be *someone*, though he suspected . . .

oeuvre – a process assisted by the length of his nose, with an irritable frantic air, bent one eye up from a great height.

'Fog,' he shouted. 'This room is full of fucking fog. Why has Lulu opened the fucking windows? I mean, November. It's *Hallowe'en*, for fuck's sake. What kind of idiot opens the windows in October? The fog comes off the river. It mists the whole place up . . .'
'If Lulu didn't open the windows,' Lindsay yelled, 'it would be impossible to breathe . . .'

'Ahhh . . .' Momentary hope dawned in his eyes. 'Why would Lulu then?'

'Intimately,' replied Lindsay, who had still to identify his hostess, let alone be introduced to her. 'Lulu and I went away back.'

This statement, designed to annoy, had an arresting effect. The pale man's fly-eyes stopped swivelling. He grasped Lindsay's arm in a demented grip, and said something frantic and inaudible, something washed away by the incoming tide of adjacent conversations. . . . 'Is he here?' Lindsay heard, as the conversation continued. 'Because fucking Lulu *swore* he was coming. The only reason I'm here . . . Have to speak to . . . Urgent. Project . . . Script. This man is my *god*. I mean, my anger, my *god*.'

'Is who here?' Lindsay shouted back, decoding the man's Court. Tomas Court.'

'Where? Where?' cried the ponytailed neighbour, as the magic name was uttered. He spun round like a top, grabbed the pale man with one hand and Lindsay with the other, spilling champagne down his shirt.

'He's here? Did you say Tomas was here?'

'No, I said *maybe* he was here.' The pale man swayed. 'Lulu *said* he'd be here. Look, d'you mind fucking going off of me?'

'Apologies, my friend.' The ponytail stepped back.

half an inch, and with difficulty focused upon Lindsay.

'And this is?'

'I don't *know* who this is,' the pale man replied in an aggrieved tone. 'She knows Lulu. She says she knows Lulu . . .' He paused. 'Whereas I've never fucking *met* Lulu. I've been here eight times and I've never met her yet.'

This surprising information seemed to forge an instant bond. The two men embraced.

'Shake, pal.' They shook. 'I'm beginning to wonder, my friend,' the ponytail remarked, in Jacobean tones, 'whether Lulu exists.'

'She says she does.' The pale man turned accusingly to Lindsay. 'Knows her intimately. Friends from way back . . .'

Fixing her with his eyes, in so far as he was able, the ponytail demanded to know where, in that case, Lulu was. 'Because,' he said, swaying like a yachtsman, 'I've been promised an introduction to Tomas. I spoke to a very very close aide of Lulu's called Pat.'

The two men eyed each other.

'Pat? Pat?' The pale man sighed. 'That rings a bell. But there's a lot of aides. Lulu has a *confusing* number of aides . . .'

'True. An ear to the ground, however. On the inside of the inside. On the *ball*. That's Lulu's strength. Elusive, though, my friend. Cancels lunch dates . . .'

'Doesn't return calls. Can't be fucking reached . . .'

'Here tonight though. Definitely here – somewhere. I have assurances. Lulu's here – and so is Tomas Court.'

Lindsay, growing anxious to escape, attempted to edge away, but the group behind her pushed her back. Oblivious to her presence, an expression of demented reverence came upon the pale man's face.

'Tomas Court!' he cried. 'I worship that man. I bow down before him. I say – and I don't fucking care who

'A director of genius, my friend. No argument. *Dead Heat*?'

'Incandescent. I've seen it fifteen times. A masterpiece. I fucking wept.'

'Pure film, my friend. In a class of its own. Except . . .'

'The spider sequence?'

'Cheap. I would have to say that. Edging towards the cheap.'

'Vulgar?'

'My friend, I'd have to agree. Seriously vulgar. Even jejune. You could say – a mistake.'

'He makes mistakes!' Here, the pale man became very animated. 'OK, it's heresy, but I'll say it: Tomas Court makes mistakes, misjudgements. And *Dead Heat* is riddled with them . . .'

'The end is lousy. *Dead Heat* has a lousy ending. Personally, I have my doubts about the beginning, as well . . .'

'What's your view on the editing?'

'A fucking shambles.'

'Dialogue?'

'Please. I could write better dialogue in my sleep.'

'No heart, my friend.' Ponytail sighed. 'It's all window dressing. Smart-ass movie graduate stuff. Post-modern posturing. *Hommage*. Quotes. Does Tomas Court even *understand* genre, my friend? That's the question I ask myself . . .'

'Understand it? He couldn't spell it.'

'He's sold out, in my view. He's peaked, let's face it. He peaked a while ago. He was a flash in the pan. He . . .'

'Actually, he's over there,' said Lindsay, who had now decided that she disliked these two cabaret artists very much. 'He's over there by the door,' she continued, giving them both the sweetest smile she possessed.

'Don't you see him? By the door, with Lulu.'

She pointed across the room. There, in a thick cluster

by the entrance, stood a tall and dramatically dressed woman of a certain age, who jutted up from the heaving crowd like a gaunt, weatherbeaten lighthouse. None of her companions was Tomas Court, now so famous that Lindsay would have recognized him, and the tall woman was not Lulu Sabatier, but paleface and ponytail deserved punishment, and this woman was, without a doubt, the most terminally boring woman Lindsay had ever met in her life. Grasping Lindsay as she entered, she had pinned her to the wall and gone through her last screenplay scene by scene and comma by comma. Emma was mad about it, she said; Michelle had read it - it was female, female, female - and Michelle had flipped.

'That woman there.' Lindsay pointed again. 'The one in the burnous. That's Lulu. She's been waiting there for Tomas Court all evening. He just came in, a second ago. Sharon Stone was with him, I think . . .'

'Christ . . .' Paleface and ponytail convulsed. Parting the waters, they hit the waves at speed; as some wind in the room took up the cry 'Tomas Court, Tomas Court' a host of back-up vessels surged in their wake. A social tide turned; two, four, ten, fifteen, thirty others caught the prevailing current and made for the beachhead of the burnous. Lindsay, well satisfied, watched this armada with delight. The burnous woman, used to being avoided, greeted her new-found popularity with stupefaction. Lindsay slipped her moorings, shifted behind the now-vacant pillar, and resolved to lie low, over the horizon, out of sight.

She had been at the party less than an hour by then; it felt like a week. Somewhere during the course of the evening, she had lost her grip, and time and age had run amok. A rattled forty by the time she left her apartment, she suddenly turned thirty in the elevator here as soothed by . . .

speed. Here, she was able to conceal herself from paleface and ponytail and any revenge they might seek. She moved back behind a huge and magnificent swagged curtain, constructed from plebeian sailcloth, but fringed with patrician silks, and, watching the ceaseless ebb and flow, waited for the magic potion – it was Krug – to take effect.

Here, with a view down through wisps and drifts of mist to the sleek black curve of the river, she became calmer. Below her, she discovered, lay a garden, a garden that was subtly and theatrically lit, with a dark central fish pool, clipped topiary shapes, and some pale statuary. She could see a goddess or two, one lacking arms, a lovely blind nereid, and a nymph on a pedestal, who appeared to ward off the attentions of a nearby god. It was an enchanting garden, made the more beautiful by the flow of the river beyond, and she found that the garden – or the champagne – was soothing her. Her age steadied and approached normal; the throb of those mysterious party turbines seemed quieter. Leaning against the iron balustrade across the open window, she inhaled damp, foggy city air. Was she in London? She felt she might have been elsewhere, anywhere. She was beginning to feel like Alice, made tiny enough to enter Wonderland by swallowing the contents of a bottle labelled, 'Drink me', and then made absurdly tall by nibbling a cake.

She thought of Alice, swimming in a lake of her own tears. She thought of Alice, a most sensible girl stabilizing her size fluctuations by – how had she done it exactly? Lindsay frowned down at the imperceptible flow of the river below, trying to remember – by eating from alternate sides of a mushroom, she thought – and a vivid image came to her of reading this story aloud to Tom when he was seven, perhaps eight. It was a period she knew, of some background pain, one of the last

thrown out by the latest girl, had attempted to come back.

It was probably the time, if she were accurate, when she finally realized, five years after her divorce, that she neither loved nor needed him any more. She could remember looking at him, as he stood in the doorway, and she could remember the faint surprise she had felt when she realized that she had loved, married, divorced, and agonized over a man whom she neither liked nor respected; a man who had wasted too much of her time. How *stupid* I was, she had thought, closing the door.

Yes, all of that had been happening; yet now, looking back, she found that those incidents had drifted away and in their place, anchoring her, distinct as the links in a chain, were her evenings with her son; evening after evening, hour after peaceful hour, in which they shared the fantastic adventures of a Victorian child, encircled by lamplight, absorbed in a story, both of them contented and wanting nothing more.

Over a decade ago, those evenings, now. Sharp as a *poignard*, Lindsay felt the familiar stab of regret. Such a life of grace did not, and could not, endure; children grow up, and even the most adult of children's books, were put away. Children grew up, and now her son's need for her company was diminished and infrequent — as she had always accepted it would one day be.

It would have been consoling, she thought, watching the river flow, to know that someone else did still retain a need for her; the kind of need that accompanies love. Her husband, an enduring partner. It would have been easier and less painful, Lindsay sometimes believed, to adjust to her present state had she not had to do so alone. However, alone she was and alone she was likely to remain, and the worst possible way of dealing with that was to indulge in this kind of melancholy introspection. Lindsay pinched herself viciously — one of her tricks — and read herself a few bracing lectures. S

up by an impetuous man who grabbed her arm, waved a bottle of pills, and announced he was about to commit suicide; on Lindsay's informing him that, in these circumstances his decision was perfectly understandable, he had a change of heart and decided to have another drink instead.

At last, still nursing a few dregs of champagne, she found herself alone in a corridor, a long white corridor, lined with posters for, and stills from, famous movies: *Casablanca*, *Persona*, *Citizen Kane*, *Gone With the Wind*, *La Règle du Jeu*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Jules et Jim*, *Dead Heat*, *Bicycle Thieves*, *The Virgin Spring* . . . Lindsay had seen all of these films, many with Tom who was a film buff and movie addict. She passed along the display, slowing first at one, then another. She came to a halt in front of the celebrated poster for Tomas Court's third and breakthrough movie, *Dead Heat*, the film paleface and ponytail had been lauding and denigrating earlier.

It showed a still from that movie which had now become so famous it was part of the collective consciousness, imprinted on the minds of almost everyone, whether they had seen the actual movie or not. This image, reproduced on a million T-shirts, had first been seen by Lindsay some eighteen months before in New York; it had been blown up 30 feet high, and had been hanging the façade of a movie theatre on Madison. A marriage of beauty and menace, she had thought then; she had found it disturbing, and still did.

It was a cunningly lit, rear-view shot of Natasha Lawrence, still Tomas Court's wife when the movie was shot, but divorced from him shortly after its première. She was barebacked, and was framed by a suggestion of a white curtain to her left, and by a blank white wall in front and to the right of her. Lawrence's singularly beautiful face could not be seen; her dark hair was cropped as short as a boy's; her right arm was lifted and pressed against the wall; her left arm was pressed against

her side; a shaft of light slanted against the curve of her spine, below which the picture was cropped.

This image might have been, and in some senses was, an Ingres-like tribute to the beauty and allure of a woman's back, though Lawrence was thinner than any of Ingres's Odalisques. The eye was drawn by the exquisite pallor of the skin, by the arch of the slender neck, by the line of the spine; it suggested the skeletal, while celebrating the voluptuousness of flesh. Then, gradually, the eye was drawn by what appeared, at a casual glance, to be some small birthmark or blemish, a small dark patch high on the left scapula. On closer examination, this dark area proved to be neither a blemish, nor a tattoo – most people's second assumption – but a spider, an actual spider, a real spider, of modest dimensions, with delicate legs and black skin. Discovering this, women had been known to shriek and shrink back; Lindsay herself, who could deal with spiders, had felt a certain revulsion. A Freudian revulsion, Tom had later annoyingly claimed; a revulsion Court no doubt intended, Rowland McGuire had remarked, since Court was the most manipulative of directors – and the most manipulative of men, or so it was said.

Looking at this image now, Lindsay felt she saw elements in it which she had missed before; the image, and the very violent sequence from which it was taken – a sequence she had never watched in its entirety, because she always covered her eyes – seemed to her to have a riddling multiplicity of meanings: it could be read both ways, she felt; from the right and from the left.

She was about to pass on towards the stairs, which she could now see at the end of this corridor, and which she hoped, if her navigation were accurate, might lead down to the garden below, when a small accident occurred. Stepping back, eyes still on that poster for

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Dead Heat, she collided with a woman, and – apologizing – swung around. The woman, equally startled it seemed, almost dropped the four laden plates she was balancing, and gave a small cry of alarm.

‘Whoops,’ she said, in a strong Australian or New Zealand accent, as a solitary olive bounced off the plates, rolled along the corridor, and came to rest in front of some bookshelves by the stairs.

Lindsay, guiltily aware that she might now be trespassing, looked the woman up and down. She was tall and gaunt, with a large nose, rabbit teeth, small, round, granny glasses, and an arresting head of long, thick, near-white hair. Despite the hair colour, she was, Lindsay realized, around forty years old, no more. She was wearing what might have been a uniform: a neat black dress with white collar and cuffs, but no apron. Was she a waitress? Lindsay looked at the woman, and then at the plates she was somewhat furtively carrying.

‘Goodies,’ said the woman, following the direction of Lindsay’s glance.

The woman appeared to have raided the sumptuous buffet table Lindsay had glimpsed earlier, through the crowds. Heaped on the plates were cheeses and grapes; there was a large wedge of some spectacular gilded pastry pie, some of the wrens’ eggs, a glistening pyramid of caviar. There might have been some lobster – Lindsay thought she glimpsed a claw – and on the largest of the plates was a cornucopia arrangement of little tarts and cakes and miniaturized meringues, spun-sugar confections, marzipan *amuse-gueules* and tiny black chocolate *petits fours*. Balanced on top of them was a marzipan apple, tinted pink and green, with a clove for a stem; a pretty conceit. This, to Lindsay’s surprise, the gaunt woman suddenly passed to her.

‘Delicious, yeah?’ It *was* delicious. ‘Mrs Sabatier is really pleased with these caterers. She says they’re a find.’

'I expect I shouldn't be here,' Lindsay said, extracting the clove, and, for want of anywhere else, putting it in her pocket. 'I hope this isn't out of bounds . . .'

'No worries.'

'It's just - I used to be good at parties, but I seem to have lost the knack.'

'I don't blame you.' The woman smiled, showing even more rabbit teeth. 'It's pandemonium back there.'

'It is rather.' The woman had begun to move off, and Lindsay trotted after her. 'I was just wondering - I wanted to see the garden . . .'

'The garden?' The woman came to a halt.

'Would Mrs Sabatier mind? I could see it from above. It looked so beautiful. There's all these marvellous statues, a goddess, a nymph . . .'

The woman hesitated, then shrugged.

'I guess it's all right. Mrs Sabatier's gone to bed anyway. She avoids these parties of hers like the plague. And you are?'

'My name's Lindsay Drummond. I work at the *Correspondent* . . .'

The woman looked her up and down.

'Right. Mrs Sabatier probably wouldn't mind. It's those stairs over there. If you get stopped, if anyone objects, just say Pat gave you the OK . . .'

'Pat?'

'That's me. Really.' She made an encouraging gesture. 'It's fine. The doors are open. You don't need a key.'

As she made this remark, Pat was moving off rapidly again. With Lindsay at her heels, she approached a wall of bookshelves at the head of the stairs. Without further speech, she opened an invisible door in these bookshelves and disappeared. What a cunning piece of *trompe l'oeil*, Lindsay thought, pausing to examine it; why, even the hinges were well-nigh undetectable. She examined the false book spines, amused; then she began to descend the stairs. There, at a turn on a lower landing, she ran into Markov and Jippy at last. They turned back

with her and accompanied her to the garden where, Markov claimed, they had been lurking for a while.

'Smart move, huh?' he said. 'It was purgatory there. Wall to wall jerks. No sign of Tomas Combs saw you skulking at the window. We waved . . .

Lindsay was not listening. She was looking at her, entranced. A secret garden, she thought, invisible from the street, invisible from any other building, the one she had just left. Mist drifted across the symmetry of the hedges and settled above the surface of the pool. It was as quiet as any country she could hear, just, the tidal slap against stone river beyond; from above, like the murmur of bees, muted sounds from the party; no traffic was audible; no roads were visible; across on the far bank of the river she could just see the outline of some industrial building bulking as large as a cathedral in the dark. Markov and Jippy had taken her arms; now, Lindsay disengaged herself. She wandered away, touching the stone balustrade's crumbling hem, then the base of her ardent pedestal. She reached up and touched the man's sightless eyes.

'Look, Markov, Jippy,' she said. 'Isn't she lovely in daylight, I'm sure she's meant to be blind, but the light gives her eyes. She's looking across the river . . . What time is it, Markov?'

'Nearly midnight. Around midnight, Lindsay.' Lindsay had moved off again. She trailed her hand dreamily over the crisp crests of the topiary hedges, made her way along a path, the river flowing ahead of her, and Markov and Jippy somewhere behind her in the shadows. Perhaps Jippy brought me here to this garden, Lindsay thought; perhaps it was Jippy's companionship that made her feel truly at peace for the first time that evening, for Jippy's presence always calmed her.

She stepped through a gap in the hedge

approached a wooden balustrade. She leaned over it, wisps of mist drifting, then clearing, and looked down at the flow of the tide. The river was smooth and dark, a liquid looking-glass; reflected in it, bending gently then reassembling as the currents moved beneath, she could see the moon, lights like orbs, and an Ophelia-woman, pale and poised on the tide, who looked up at her, half drowned, from some water world beneath.

In the distance, a church clock chimed, then another, then a third. The last minute of the last hour of the last day of deadline month. Lindsay thought of Rowland McGuire, who had felt close, very close, the instant she came out here. She would summon him up, Lindsay decided, before, as she had resolved she would, she said her final and irrevocable goodbye.

Rowland McGuire, this week, was away. Taking his first vacation in a year from the newspaper he edited, he was climbing with friends on the Isle of Skye, or possibly – for his plans were subject to change – he had moved on to join another old friend from his Oxford days, a man who, as far as Lindsay could gather, was associated with the film industry in some way. This man had wanted Rowland to join him in Yorkshire, where he was engaged on some hush-hush project of an undisclosed kind, which – for unspecified reasons – required unspecified assistance from Rowland McGuire.

Scotland; Yorkshire. Lindsay closed her eyes, spinning together these inconclusive strands in her mind. Behind her somewhere, Markov was talking about nothing as usual, and Jippy was walking up and down in a somewhat anxious way. She concentrated: Yorkshire, she felt sure and, since her imagination was on such occasions busy, detailed and compliant, Rowland rose up before her with a visionary speed.

There he was, in some remote place – Rowland liked remote places, and liked to be alone in them. Lindsay discovered he had spent the day on some Etruscan

moor. She could see its crags and its heathers; she could hear a lapwing's cry. She could watch Rowland stride across these wuthering heights: this she did for a while, and very dark, handsome and desirable he looked. Then Lindsay settled him down in an inn by a blazing log fire, a inn delightfully unencumbered by the friend or other inconvenient occupants. Rowland, she found, was reading – well, he usually was. Yes, he was definitely reading, and he was wearing the green sweater Lindsay had given him the previous Christmas, a sweater which was almost exactly the same green as his eyes. She could not quite see the title of his book, a pity that, but she could read Rowland's mind. He was thinking about her; he had just decided that before he turned in, he would give Lindsay a quick call.

'Correct me if I'm wrong,' Markov said, on a plaintive note, 'but is it suddenly arctic out here? Jippy, can you feel the wind getting up? It's *Siberian*. Brrr . . . Like my eggs are icy, my nose is icy, my hands . . .'

'Oh, for God's sake, Markov, shut *up*,' Lindsay cried, and concentrated again.

It might have been pleasant had Rowland begun that telephone call with some momentous word – 'darling', for instance, would have done very nicely indeed. Lindsay's imagination, however, had its dry, its legalistic side; it was a stickler for accuracy. Rowland, therefore, did not use this, or any other inflammatory term; he simply addressed her, as he always did, by name.

And then – she could hear his voice distinctly – he told her in a friendly, fraternal way what he had been up to this past week. He enquired as to her own recent activities and announced he'd be returning to London soon. He recommended a book for Tom's Oxford history course. He passed on his best wishes to Tom; then, with less obvious warmth, but a politeness characteristic of him, he sent his regards to Lindsay's difficult mother, whom he disliked, not unreasonably, and to her

mother's new husband, disliked by both Lindsay and Rowland, who disparaged him with enjoyment and accord.

These formalities over, he said, as he often did, that it was good to hear her voice, hoped she was well and looked forward to seeing her again soon.

Lindsay disconnected. It was a conversation of a kind she had had with Rowland a hundred times: amusing, polite, concerned, dispassionate, brotherly; these conversations broke her heart. Rowland, of course, did not know that, at least Lindsay was hopeful he did not, for she kept her own feelings well concealed, and had done so now for a long time – almost three years.

Lindsay opened her eyes; the moment felt auspicious. She looked down at her own wavering Ophelia-woman reflection, and wished Rowland a long goodbye. She said her farewell, her final farewell, to the other Rowland, the Rowland she wanted but could not have, the Rowland that inhabited a future that was never going to happen. Let him go, oh let him go, she said to herself and then, since she wished him nothing but well, she added a rider: that Rowland might find a woman who would bring him the happiness he deserved, and that he would do so yesterday, tomorrow, at once, very soon.

This was a spell, as Lindsay was aware. She could sense its power in the air, but it was important, indeed vital, that effective spells be correctly wound up. Accordingly, she touched wood three times; she crossed and uncrossed her fingers three times, but these actions seemed insufficiently solemn – she felt, obscurely, that some offering or sacrifice needed to be made. And so, hoping neither Markov nor Jippy could see her actions, she opened her small evening bag. Inside it, folded small, was a note written by Rowland McGuire. It was not a long note, nor were its contents – they concerned work – of any great significance, but it was the only specimen of Rowland's handwriting she possessed, a

she had been carrying it around like a talisman for nearly three years. A small square of paper: 'Dear Lindsay,' this note began. If she read it, she knew she would weaken, so she did not read it – anyway, she knew its four-line contents by heart. Leaning over the balustrade, she let this charmed piece of paper fall. It eddied towards her, then away; some current of air caught it, and it settled on the water like a pale moth; she watched it be carried away by the tide.

The gesture made her sad, but she also felt immeasurably lighter, she found. She floated back up the path, arm in arm with Markov and Jippy, Markov grumbling about the cold and Jippy's quiet gaze resting on the flagstones ahead. It was at this point in the evening, perhaps a little belatedly, that Lindsay, glancing at Jippy, wondered if he might have been influencing her once more. It was Jippy, after all, who had suggested Markov procure her the invitation to this party; it was at Jippy's urging that she had kept that invitation, and she began to suspect now that it was Jippy's influence that had weighed with her when she finally decided to go. It was odd, was it not, she thought, that he and Markov had been in the garden all evening, as if they had been waiting for her there. With Jippy, mainly because his presence was so silent and unobtrusive, it was always easy to forget he was there; it was only after her meetings with him were over that Lindsay sometimes suspected he had *influenced* her in some shadowy way, with some invisible sleight of hand.

Now, drifting back through the garden to the stairs, she had, most strongly, the sensation that Jippy had possibly been guiding her, and that he was certainly guiding her now. This was superstition on her part, she told herself; Jippy did not *do* anything to which she could have pointed in evidence – at least not for a little while. Even so, the impression grew; it was imprecise and hazy, yet it was strong. Jippy's grip on her arm was light; he

guided her back along that white corridor, Markov forging ahead of them both now, and he guided her back through the tides of that party crowd. Lindsay could sense both that he wished to speak and was as yet unable to do so, and that he had a destination in view for her; looking at his pale, set face, she felt sure this destination was close, perhaps just the other side of those entrance doors.

Their passage through the party was not the easiest of odysseys. Caught up in the swirling currents, they were buffeted towards that lipstick-red couch with its limpet men and siren girls; negotiating that, they were accosted, several times, by various ancient mariners wishing to tell various tales. Jippy guided them past these hazards; he paused briefly as paleface and ponytail hove into view, lamenting the latest news, which was that treacherous Lulu Sabatier had organized simultaneous Hallowe'en parties in New York and Los Angeles to celebrate Diablo, and that – ultimate treachery! – Tomas Court was now rumoured to be at one or the other of these.

'But *which*, my friend, *which*?' the ponytail cried.

'I don't *know*,' paleface responded. 'I don't fucking *well know*.'

'If I find Lulu, my friend, I won't be responsible for my actions . . .'

'I'll fucking *well kill* her,' cried paleface, diving into some murky confluence by the doors.

Jippy gave a small gentle smile at this and touched Lindsay's arm. The crowds parted like the Red Sea before Moses, and she and Jippy surged through. Outside, in the peace and darkness of the streets, Jippy and Markov escorted Lindsay back to her car. They walked footsteps echoing, along narrow cobbled roads, with the dark walls, the rusting winches and traps of abandoned warehouse machinery, rising up on either side. Just audible on the breeze came the slithering sound of river

water against mud; Lindsay could sense that Jippy still wished to speak and was still struggling to voice words.

Nearly half a mile from Lulu's loft-palace, they finally found Lindsay's little car, parked outside a ruinous, boarded-up church, with one of its wheels – Lindsay was impetuous at parking – on the pavement. From the deserted streets, from nowhere, the taxi Markov had been demanding of the air some seconds earlier, now appeared. No-one was too surprised by this phenomenon; such things tended to happen when Jippy was around.

'Greece, tomorrow.' Markov kissed Lindsay. 'Blue skies, sun, pagan temples, *divine* hotels. Enjoy Oxford. Enjoy New York. See you when we get back, my dearest. We leave at dawn!'

He then began to argue with the taxi driver – he always argued with taxi drivers on principle – about the route he should take to Markov's London apartment, which, like the other bolt-holes Markov maintained around the world, was enviably situated, utterly practical, and very small.

'Goodbye, Jippy,' Lindsay said, kissing him. 'I hope you have a wonderful holiday. Send me a card . . .'

'I w-w-will. I . . .' There came a lengthy, choking pause. Knowing that Jippy was finally about to volunteer the statement she had sensed was imminent when they were in the garden, Lindsay waited quietly while he fought consonants.

'Y-y-y-yaw . . .' Jippy stuck painfully; his brown eyes beseeched her. Lindsay did not prompt, for she knew that could make him seize up completely; she shivered as the wind gusted.

'Y-y-y-York . . .' he managed finally. Lindsay stared at him. Drops of sweat now beaded his forehead; his face was pale. Gently, she took his hand.

'York? Do you mean Yorkshire, Jippy? I was thinking

of Yorkshire, earlier. When we were in that garden. Did you know?’

Jippy nodded, then shook his head. He gripped her hand tightly; his own felt deathly cold.

‘Ch-ch . . .’ This word, also, would not be said. Lindsay glanced over her shoulder at the desolate, semi-ruined building, with its forlorn boarded eyes. Church? Was Jippy trying to say church?

‘Are you all right, Jippy?’ she began. ‘You look . . .’ She hesitated; ‘afraid’ was the word that sprang to mind, but she was reluctant to use it. She could sense some alarm, some skin-chilling anxiety; it was being communicated to her from Jippy’s cold hand. His lips were now trembling with the effort of words; his eyes rested on hers with a dog-like fidelity; she could not tell for sure, she realized, whether his expression was happy or sad. He gave a small convulsive jerk of the head and suddenly the word, the phrase, burst through its restrictions.

‘Ch-check your machine.’

Lindsay looked at him blankly. She had been expecting a less mundane statement; according to Markov, Jippy’s words often carried a secondary, hidden meaning, but this suggestion seemed to defy all but the most obvious of interpretations.

‘My machine, Jippy? You mean my answering machine? When? Tonight? But I always check it anyway . . .’

Jippy’s burst of eloquence was over. This time, he did not shake his head or nod; he bestowed on her instead one of his heartening, benevolent smiles – a smile Lindsay would remember, many months later, when she came to consider the results of this evening, and of Jippy’s advice. He pressed her hand, then climbed into the cab beside Markov. As it drove away, both men waved. Curiouser and curiouser, Lindsay thought, driving home.

Mindful of Jippy's words, and still haunted by his expression, she checked her fax and her answering machine immediately she entered her apartment. Her hopes, which had risen high on the drive back here, now fell. No faxes; no messages; the machine's unwinking red light mocked her. During her absence, no-one had called her – from Yorkshire, or indeed from elsewhere.

'You have a point there.'

'Rowland, I'm having communication difficulties; severe ones. That bloody man's unavailable; he's not taking calls. And my fax machine won't *feed*; it's making these puking noises, Rowland, every time I redial . . .'

'Tough,' said Rowland, and closed the door.

Ignoring the primal, plaintive cries this action provoked, Rowland crossed the cottage's small untended garden, opened its reluctant gate, breathed in the freshness of the air and began to walk up the steep track beyond.

Somewhere below him, hidden by the curvature of the hills, lay the cluster of church and farms which comprised the only settlement resembling a village for many miles. From that hamlet, as he walked, came the sound of a church bell tolling midnight. An infinitesimal pause on each stroke, before the clapper struck bronze; the turning of a day, the turning of a month; not a night of ill-omen, Rowland thought, increasing his pace, but, rightly, a night when the dead were remembered or placated, and prayers were said for the salvation of their souls.

It was not the dead, but the living who were on his mind as he walked. As soon as he was alone, he felt the touch of a hand, heard the whisper of a voice; since the hand and the voice belonged to a woman now the wife of another man, and mother to that man's child, he tried at once to push her away and drown all remembrance of her. He had tactics for this process; sooner or later, they usually succeeded. It was harder here, in this isolated place, than it was in London, where he could be distracted by the hurly-burly of work, but even so the exorcism could be achieved.

Facts, and the contemplation of facts, helped; it was also useful to have problems that needed solving. Lacking now the enjoyable immediate difficulties he could rely on in London – investigations, deadlines,

although that care was often well disguised. Critics, and they tended to be ageing and male, missed the shape and purpose of Court's movies, unable to see beyond their genre disguise. Younger critics, Rowland agreed with them, could see the use Court made of cinematic conventions. To Rowland, Court's movies had an inexorable logic; frame by frame, they bore the stamp of his vision; they were conceived, shot and edited by a cunning and well-disciplined director's hand.

The movies then, Rowland thought, were his best clue to Court's character; beyond them, the facts were few. Court rarely gave interviews, and any biographical evidence was minimal. He was of Czech descent, and as far as Rowland could remember, had grown up poor in the Midwest, at some point Anglicizing his original family name. He was now in his forties, and had come to movies unusually late for an American new-wave director. He was not some Hollywood wunderkind, but had studied movies as a mature student, after several years in the military, in – as far as Rowland could recall – the Marines. His early work as a director attracted a small art-house following; it was only after his marriage to the already famous Natasha Lawrence that his career took off. With their third film together, *Dead Heat*, the Court cult truly began. Now Tomas Court was divorced, so the parties claiming the divorce was bitter, others amicable. Whatever the truth, Court and his former wife continued to work together, and were about to do so again, Colin confirmed. According to Colin, Tomas Court had loved and lost – in which case, Rowland thought doubtless Court's circumstances mirrored his own.

Still intent on releasing memory's grip, the last clinging grasp of its small, cold-fingered hand, Rowland turned his mind from such considerations. The track forked here, and he decided to head off to his left, making for the shadowy outcrop of rocks high above

him. He began to consider his richest source of information, his friend Colin. Colin was scarcely the most reliable of witnesses, but he was an entertaining one. With a sense of growing relief and amusement, walking on, Rowland considered Tomas Court the professional, who had erupted into Colin Lascelles's life, via a 2 a.m. telephone call from America some eight months before.

At that time, Tomas Court had been riding high on the critical and commercial success of *Dead Heat* (Genre: thriller. Setting: an unidentified American city). There was advance-word praise for his then soon-to-be-released movie, *Willow Song* (Genre: *film noir*. Setting: a Paris populated by American émigrés; according to Lindsay's son, Tom, subsequently: 'A cross between Tarantino and Henry James').

In that telephone call, Court had informed Colin that he was now planning to make his first movie in England, and that it was to be an adaptation of a nineteenth-century novel. It would star, as most of Court's movies did, his erstwhile wife, Natasha Lawrence; it would be produced and scripted, as were all his movies, by Court himself. Colin had been surprised by this information, since the subject matter represented a departure from Court's previous movies. Later, on reflection, he was less surprised. Court's work had always been eclectic, and he liked to experiment with different genres; if a director such as Scorsese could move from mafiosi to Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, why shouldn't Court decide to take a similar course?

Colin, who had been fast asleep when the call came through, and who discovered he had a blinding hangover when awakened, realized, at some point in the conversation – it dawned on him slowly – that Court was virtually offering him the job of this movie's location manager. At which point, fumbling for light switch and cigarettes in the dark, he requested further details. When? He was told. Studio, backers? He was told that

too. Financing, budget? A stream of precise and impressive figures flowed down the phone. By that time, Colin had the light on; he was holding a pad and pencil in his right hand and juggling two lighted cigarettes in his left. Elation was taking hold. He had just agreed to meet Court in Prague, two days later, and Court was about to hang up, when it occurred to Colin, through qualms of residual intoxication and mounting excitement, that there were other rather more vital questions he should have asked.

He duly asked them. In particular, he asked which nineteenth-century novel Court meant to film. To his surprise, Court then became evasive. The name of the novel was not given over the telephone, nor was it given at the subsequent first meeting in Prague; a meeting which took place in a huge, shuttered, dimly lit hotel suite, and which lasted precisely one hour. During that hour, the tall, quietly spoken Court asked questions, and Colin, who was nervous, talked a great deal. He was not allowed to smoke – Court claimed to suffer from asthma, and indeed several asthma inhalers were in prominent view. By the time he left, Colin felt he had overcome this disadvantage, that he had talked good sense and acquitted himself reasonably well.

It was only later, as he went over and over the interview in his mind, that he realized how inconclusive, how puzzling, it had been. Recollecting it, it became disorderly; a dusty imprecision now clouded his view. He realized he could not recall exactly what Tomas Court had said, and that he had spoken very little. He realized that, having expected to acquire information, he had acquired virtually none – meanwhile he himself had given too much away.

'I *talked*,' he had told Rowland, over a drink a few days later. 'I damn well never drew breath, God knows why. Something came over me. He just sat there; he wasn't even asking questions by then, and I suddenly

felt this *compulsion*. It was like the confessional. Worse. I just gabbled away . . .

'What about?'

'I don't *know*.' He sank his head in his hands. 'My father, my brother's funeral, my American great-aunt – you remember, Rowland, Great-Aunt Emily; you met her a few times.'

'What else?'

'Worse – it gets worse, Rowland . . .'

'Not the Qantas flight?' Rowland sighed. 'Tell me you didn't do that, Colin . . .'

'I did, I *did*. The woman on the plane – I told him the whole story. *Twice*. I want to die . . .'

Never mind . . .' Rowland tried to sound encouraging. Things must have improved. What about work? Did you tell him—'

'Work?' Colin gave a bitter, mirthless cry. 'I never mentioned work. I meant to, obviously. I was going to tell him my Visconti anecdote. I thought that might go down well. But I didn't. I just sicked up all this *stuff*. Feelings – I talked about feelings. I could die of embarrassment. He'll never use me now. I told him things I didn't even *know* until that exact moment. I wasn't even looking at him; I was too intimidated. I was just staring at those blasted asthma inhalers and spilling out my soul.'

Colin's Sophoclean gloom proved unfounded, and his predictions were not fulfilled. Court subsequently offered him the job of this movie's location manager, but several more weeks, another meeting and innumerable telephone calls later, he still had not seen a script, even a draft script, even an outline, and he still did not know the name of the nineteenth-century novel Court intended to film.

Others, he discovered, on making delicate enquiries, were similarly in the dark. Court, it seemed, was hard to pin down, but had been flitting in and out of London

approached the doyenne of British casting directors; he might have secured the services of a legendary, autocratic and inspirational designer; he had had talks with technicians and SFX specialists; agents had been lunched; certain actors had been wooed – even the name of Nic Hicks had been mentioned – and now gusts of rumour, counter-rumour, expectation and surmise had begun to waft around London's fashionable watering holes. A tremendous, inchoate energy had been released, but just as, on each of these flitting visits, it swirled up into a dust-storm of excitement and activity, Tomas Court would depart.

He would depart to a film festival in Berlin, or to Los Angeles for post-production work, then sneak previews of *Willow Song*. He would swoop off to Reykjavik for two days, or Oslo for three, or Athens for an hour and a half. Alternatively – and as Rowland understood it, this was the present situation – he would be holed up in the ranch he had recently bought in northern Montana, situated near the Glacier National Park, and consisting of 10,000 acres of rock, river and trees – this according to Colin, who had never been there.

These absences, as far as Rowland could understand, made little difference since, wherever he was, whether in a limousine, or mid-air, or holed up in his wilderness stronghold, Tomas Court *communicated*. From him, or from one of his numerous aides, assistants and side-kicks, issued a daily, sometimes an hourly, flow of letters, faxes and calls. The tenor of these, Rowland gathered, was terse. In person and on paper, Tomas Court seemed a man of few words. Of the few words employed, his favourite was 'No'.

Extracting information from him, Colin had rapidly discovered, was as difficult as finding a vein to extract blood from in a sinewy arm; when the vein *was* located, the blood refused to flow. Nor was he alone in this

Tomas Court, as Colin had noticed by then, had remarkable eyes. He now turned those eyes upon Colin and bestowed upon him one of his long, silent, disconcerting stares.

Court's eyes, narrow, somewhat cat-like, and not without beauty, were of a pale, watery, greenish-hazel hue. Colin found it impossible to read their expression, and could never say why he found their inspection such an unpleasant experience. Court always appeared well mannered, patient and calm; nothing in his gaze suggested disapproval or distrust or dislike, yet Colin at once felt deeply uneasy, as if Court possessed some alien vision, X-ray eyes, Martian eyes, which enabled him to see through Colin's body to inspect the back of his skull. Lies, evasions, boasts and untruths, Colin feared, lay naked before the gaze of this quietly spoken man. He squirmed in his chair (they were meeting in New York, this time, in yet another dimly lit, anonymous hotel).

Colin's question he felt, was like most of his questions, not going to be answered. Rebelling, and summoning some residue of spirit, he repeated it. Court sighed and looked away.

'The heroine interested me, I guess,' he replied. 'She's the tenant of the title, you see.'

Colin did *not* see. He assumed illumination would come when – as he later put it to Rowland – he actually read the blasted novel. Tomas Court now provided him with a copy of it, and of his draft script; with alacrity Colin read both. Having done so, he was none the wiser. He liked the script, which seemed to him to depart from the original novel quite rapidly, but he found the novel itself very heavy going indeed.

'I ploughed through,' he reported to Rowland. 'I ploughed through *religiously* . . .'

'And?'

'It's all very well for you to smile, you already know

it. You never damn well stop reading; it's a disease with you. You *like* things like that – God knows why.'

'You didn't enjoy it then?'

'Enjoy it? I was *crucified* with boredom. The beginning's OK. This mystery woman arrives; she's called Ielen. I quite like that bit, but after that it's downhill the way.'

From this robust, if possibly simplistic view, Colin could not be dissuaded. Rowland wasted no time on arguments; Colin, armed with Court's script and abandoning all thoughts of the novel, began work. He was very experienced and very good at his work, and initially the location searching went well. Several months passed, during which Rowland occasionally received progress reports. These, at first, were very upbeat; indeed, then a detectable note of doubt began to creep in.

Initially, Tomas Court was a marvel, and Colin worshipped at his shrine. He lauded his attention to detail, his perfectionism, the constant fertile flood of his ideas. Then, it seemed, Court could be inspired, certainly, but was also somewhat *changeable*. A week later, the word 'indecision' was used; a week after that the charge had hardened – 'wilful perversity' was now the term. Spoken of as 'Tomas', and with considerable warmth, when this saga began, this modulated to a curt 'Court' some weeks later; there was then a period when he was known, in a jocular, defensive tone as 'the evil genius'; for the past month he had been simply 'that bloody man'. These were the staging posts whereby Colin's initial enthusiasm and admiration dwindled to uncertainty, then irritation, then irascibility, then resentment, and finally – this was his present state – despair.

This journey of Colin's towards the crisis he had now reached had been watched by Rowland from the sidelines. It had amused him at the time, and it amused him now, but beneath the amusement he felt a certain

unease. He paused, having finally reached the vantage-point on the hills to which he had been walking. He looked back the way he had come, bracing himself against the wind, which at this height was strong. It

ted, then insinuated, this wind, buffeting him, then nelling itself through the crevices in the outcrop of ks against which he leaned. In doing so, it acquired oice, a thin note of eerie lamentation, which seemed manate from the rock, or from the air itself. It chilled wland and threatened the equanimity he had been king hard to achieve. Realizing that he had remained far longer than he had intended, and walked further, moved away from the plaintive rocks, turned back ards the cottage and began to descend.

he wind hit him hard between the shoulder-blades; ang out its ghostly protest as it whistled between nes and tugged at the heather. This was a bleak place. wland paused, fighting the past, then turned up the lar of his jacket and continued on. He would have ed to return with some useful advice for Colin, but ild think of none. He could tell him, of course, to stop rrying over whether or not Tomas Court was now ying games with him; he could tell him to soldier on. lin would do that in any case, though, for he was acious. His present fear, of course, which he could : bring himself to name, was *failure*; Colin, deeply ecure, always feared failure, and yet ran to greet it, anticipate it; there were reasons for this, as Rowland, friend for many years, was well aware.

All of these events, Rowland realized, told him more ut Colin's character than Tomas Court's. Colin had ays been precipitate, rushing in where angels feared tread, and Rowland, who usually fought his own ulsiveness more successfully, had always liked, even aired him for this. Colin was also passionate, a man extremes, as Rowland knew he too could be, on asion; but Colin was less measured and lived in a

had hated them, and had reiterated his hatred, his dissatisfaction and disappointment in a stream of wounding, cold faxes and calls. Colin, stung, had continued his search – was still continuing his search. He had travelled the length and breadth of England; he had made desperate forays into Scotland, and even more desperate forays into Wales. Returning, he despatched batches of photographs, videos, diagrams, maps and notes around the globe to the peripatetic Tomas Court. Time would pass – Court liked to keep him on tenterhooks, Colin claimed – then back would come word from Montana, or Berlin, or Los Angeles. ‘No’ was the word, was always the word, and so often and so unkindly that that word ‘No’ been said that it had precipitated in Colin a profound confidence crisis. ‘It’s not just my reputation that’s at stake here,’ he had said some three weeks previously, in London, having inveigled Rowland into joining him for dinner after work, ‘it’s my *sanity*. I want you to understand – that bloody man is sucking the marrow out of my bones, Rowland. I’m desperate. I’m at my wit’s end. I don’t know where to turn, so I’m turning to you. Help me out here, Rowland. Just *advise* me, that’s all I ask.’

Rowland had resisted this plea. Once or twice in the past he had been sucked into Colin’s dramas via the device route, and it was not an experience he had enjoyed.

‘Listen . . .’ Colin went on, ‘you know the blasted novel. There’s a description of Wildfell Hall in chapter two – you remember? Now, you’re interested in architecture. In fact, you know quite an impressive amount. Not as much as I do, obviously, but enough. You spend half your life climbing or walking in godforsaken places . . .’

‘That isn’t true. I wish it were.’

‘. . . So you have the right background knowledge. You must have some ideas. Think, Rowland. I need

aware he could be manipulative. His friend had always lacked confidence in his own abilities; a legacy from his childhood, Rowland suspected, for he had grown up in the shadow of his elder brother, killed in a car accident when Colin was in his last year at school. On the other hand, Colin thrived on crises, and if none existed, was capable of creating some of his own. On balance, Rowland thought then, he believed Colin was truly in need of some help and moral support; there was now genuine panic and bewilderment in his manner, and it alarmed Rowland, since it reminded him of Colin as he had been when he first encountered him, in Oxford, some eighteen years before.

That meeting had taken place late at night, in the quad at Balliol College, where they were both undergraduates, although they had then moved in very different social spheres. Colin, who could be heard delling before he was seen, was wearing white tie and ls, and was accompanied, or propped up, by a clutch cronies from some ancient, snobbish, august Oxford ib whose members devoted themselves to getting unk fast. Colin had just won a competition that volved drinking straight down as many bottles of ntage claret as was feasible in five minutes. He was eady celebrated throughout Oxford for his feats in is respect, which had won him the nickname Deep roat. On that occasion, he had consumed two and half bottles of Chateau Margaux 1959, and was, tonishingly, still vertical. Rowland had not come from e kind of school, or the kind of background, essential r membership of such clubs; upper-class louts were not s favourite companions, and – given to puritanism then he had looked at this rowdy group of Old Etonians th distaste.

He had been about to pass by when something in eep Throat's expression caught his eye. He was garding Rowland with a flushed, kindly innocence,

this red-haired young man, who was the heir to 12,000 acres, who had just consumed wine which cost more than Rowland could afford to spend in ten weeks. His expression conveyed precarious dignity, absurd pride and incipient distress. He made a hiccuping sound and fixed Rowland with blue, alarmed eyes. 'Help,' he said, with surprising distinctness, as he began slowly, like a felled tree, to topple forwards towards the flagstones of the quad. Rowland, in a better state of alertness than the friends were, found he had moved forward, held out his arms and caught him. They then scattered, and Deep Throat was sick – ignominiously, understandably and *accurately*, as he remarked the next morning when Rowland called in to check on him.

'I missed my shoes!' he said, bright-faced. 'I missed yours as well. Here, have some champagne. Childe Roland to the dark quad came. I'm going on the wagon tomorrow, so shall we celebrate now?'

They celebrated, at nine in the morning, with a bottle of Dom Perignon, some iced buns provided by Colin's scout, and anchovy toast burned by Colin. Rowland missed two lectures and made two discoveries: he was less of a puritan than he had thought, and he liked Colin Lascelles, who, it seemed, was even more appalled at the prospect of inheriting 12,000 acres and the minor title that went with them than Rowland McGuire was.

The next week, hung-over again, he drove Rowland out into the countryside north of Oxford and stopped the car on the edge of a beech wood. He pointed; below them, in a valley enfolded by gentle Cotswold hills, was one of the most beautiful houses Rowland had ever seen.

'That's Shute,' Colin said. 'It will be mine one day. It should have been my brother's, only he died.' Then he let in the clutch, drove them back to Oxford and started drinking again.

From that moment onwards, Colin attached himself

to Rowland, and Rowland, often exasperated by him, grew fond of him. In the eighteen years since, their relationship was little changed. Although Colin had learned to control his drinking, indulging in binges only occasionally, and was now highly successful, he remained incorrigible, and he still treated Rowland as a surrogate brother. He still asked Rowland's assistance from time to time, and when pressured, Rowland grumbled, then, often against his better judgement, gave way.

So, on the occasion of that dinner, he had agreed to help. He promised to mull the matter over, consult some friends and see what he could come up with. He suggested Colin meet him in his editorial office at the *Sunday Correspondent* the next day; there, Rowland would join him as soon as he could escape from a round of meetings.

He found Colin ensconced in his office, propositioning his secretary. Having extricated her from a situation she appeared to be enjoying – Colin was good-looking and had undeniable charm – Rowland gave him a brief and, he hoped, helpful lecture on Anne Brontë's Wildfell Hall.

'Think about this house, Colin,' he said. 'Think about the mystery woman you like so much at the beginning of the book. She's taken refuge in Wildfell Hall, hasn't she?'

'Ye-es,' said Colin, eyes beginning to glaze.

'It's not her permanent home. She doesn't own it; she's renting it, from a man.'

'I don't really see', Colin began mutinously, 'that it makes the least bit of difference *who* she's renting it from. It could just as well be some mad old grandmother – so what?'

'No, Colin. *Think*. This woman is young, she's beautiful, she has a son – and she's lied about her past. She's living under a false name and she's in *hiding* at Wildfell

Hall. What happens almost immediately after she's moved in there?'

'Oh, I don't know. All these bitchy women in the neighbourhood start gossiping about her. Gilbert Markham meets her and falls in love with her. Then – I'm not too sure about the next bit, I skipped it, I kept falling asleep; it's much better in the movie – hang on, I know! They all find out she's having a secret affair with the owner of Wildfell Hall, who's this tall, dark, brooding man. Then we get this flashback bit, and it goes on and on and on . . .'

'Dear God.' Rowland buried his head in his hands. 'How you got a degree, Colin, I'll never understand. Think. Use your *brain*. Forget all this gobbledegook; you're getting the plot wrong. Think about property, and sex, Colin, and the connections between the two . . .'

At the mention of sex, Colin's face brightened. 'I don't quite follow you, Rowland . . .'

'Listen, Colin, it may have escaped your notice, but for much of the novel, all the *property* is owned by men. The question Anne Brontë raises – one of the questions – is whether the men own the women as well.'

'Oh Lord – it's *feminist*, you mean?' Colin blinked. 'I must have missed that. No wonder I didn't like it, I can't stand that sort of thing. It's so *unnecessary*, don't you find? Look, Rowland, this is all very interesting, but could we get on? I have to find a *house* . . .'

'I know that, but this house symbolizes something, Colin.'

'Not to me it doesn't. A house is a house. It has four walls, a roof and a door. Come on, Rowland, you said you'd give me some suggestions . . .'

Rowland gave up. He passed Colin a list. Of the four houses on it, it turned out, three had already been suggested by Colin and rejected by Tomas Court, a fact he had neglected to mention. This did not appear to demoralize Colin; on the contrary, he assumed a

businesslike demeanour, produced numerous dog-eared maps and notebooks, and showed signs of cheering up.

'I knew I could rely on you!' He beamed at Rowland. 'We think alike. We're getting somewhere now.'

Pointedly, Rowland looked at his watch.

'There's just one leetle problem, Rowland. This fourth place you suggest . . . it's, well, it's a bit too remote. It's a hundred miles from all my other locations, there's no road to it, and not a whiffle of an hotel . . .'

Rowland controlled his temper. 'You didn't mention roads or hotels.'

'Well, I thought you'd *realize*. I mean, think, Rowland, I have to house a crew, the cast, Natasha Lawrence. I have to consider costs: transport, caravans, limousines, generators, computer links, catering, security. Stars don't *walk* to location, Rowland, and they're kind of fussy about hotels. I can't put Natasha Lawrence up in some boarding house, now can I?'

'Why not? She's there to work. I imagine she'd survive.'

'Don't be naïve, Rowland. You know perfectly well it doesn't work like that. We're talking suites, twenty-four-hour room service, a pool, a gym. She has a bodyguard, and she works out with him every morning . . .'

'You said *remote*, dammit . . .'

'I know, but there's remote and remote. Now don't get testy, Rowland, and don't give up on me . . .'

'Give up on you? I wouldn't dream of it. After all, apart from the small matter of getting out a Sunday newspaper, I have nothing else to do. My calls are being *held*. I'll just tell them to hold them for the next hour, shall I? Or would two suit you better?'

'Now, Rowland, don't be sarcastic. I can't take it, not just now.'

'Besides, it's perfectly straightforward, right? We should sort this out in no time. What you need is a Grade

One Jacobean house no-one's noticed or altered in four hundred years, in a remote moorland location, with satellite links and a luxury hotel at the end of its drive. What could be easier? If this newspaper doesn't come out next Sunday and I do nothing else but sit here being your psychotherapist, while you pop out and seduce my secretary once in a while . . .'

'She's a very pretty secretary, Rowland. An excellent choice.'

'... then no doubt we'll find you your house. You'll be delighted. Tomas Court will be delighted. Meanwhile, I—'

'Please, Rowland,' Colin said, in a very small, pathetic voice. '*Please*. I'm begging you now. I've helped you in the past. You remember that time at Oxford when I lent you my lecture notes?'

'No, I don't.'

'What about all those Oxford girls? I was useful to you then, Rowland. When you broke their hearts, who consoled them? I did. Max occasionally, I admit, but I was the chief consoler, Rowland, remember that.'

'You're confusing consolation and opportunism, I think.'

Colin waved this objection aside. 'Rowland, let us not argue about ancient history . . .'

'Argue about it? You can't even *remember* it. You were drunk, Colin. Perpetually drunk. You were drunk for three whole years . . .'

'You're right. You're right.' Colin sank his head in his hands. 'I was an irresponsible wastrel. A ne'er-do-well. The Lascelles black sheep. But you set me on the straight and narrow, Rowland. You got me through my exams. I'll never forget that. None of my family ever forgets it . . .'

Rowland tensed.

'So I know I have no right to ask for your help again,

but you did mention you were going on holiday next week . . .'

'What's that got to do with it?'

'Nothing. There's no need to look so suspicious. I just thought, since you'll be going north anyway . . .'

'Colin, I'm going climbing. It's the first holiday I've taken in over a year.'

'Of course. And you need that break, Rowland, you deserve it. You're looking tired, tense. Which is why I thought you might like to spend a few days in Yorkshire on your way back from Scotland. I'm renting a cottage up there as my base. It's on your route back, Rowland, and that bloody man will still be bombarding me with faxes and calls. By then, I'll be on my eighteenth perfect house, I expect, and ready to shoot myself. So it just occurred to me, maybe, out of the goodness of your heart, and because you once loved my sister, Rowland, years ago . . .'

'I did not love your sister.'

'Well, she loved you, which is much the same thing, and despite your failure to respond, she still speaks fondly of you. She's recovered, of course, she has four children now. Even so, every time your name comes up I catch this little gleam in her eye . . .'

'Colin, what do I have to do to make you go away?'

'She always says what a very good loyal *friend* you are, Rowland. Well, they all say that: my father, Great Aunt Emily; they never stop singing your praises – what a good influence you are on me. A man of honour. One to rely on in moments of extremity . . .'

Rowland sighed. 'Dear God. What have I done to deserve this? All right. OK, you win. Give me the damn address and I'll look in on my way back . . .'

Colin had taken this capitulation generously. Having got his way, at which he was skilled, he skedaddled. And now, here Rowland was, in a cold leaky cottage in the back of beyond, in the company of a man who, like

himself, could not cook. For three days, subsisting on lumpen cheese sandwiches and cans of soup, he had endured Colin's complaints and joined him on fruitless searches for a place that Rowland, too, was beginning to believe did not exist.

It was a chimera, he told himself, opening that reluctant creaking gate and approaching the cottage. When he had first been drawn into this ridiculous quest, he had seen Wildfell Hall clear in his mind; now it had receded. The more he listened to Colin, the less he saw.

It was diverting, this search, up to a point. It had the advantage of distracting him, but he now intended to return to London and work, and the real world. He would leave in the morning; he would be back in his own house by Saturday afternoon. He might telephone Lindsay perhaps . . . It was Saturday morning now, he realized, looking at his watch. He would grab a few hours sleep and leave immediately after an early breakfast . . . And he entered the cottage intending to firmly inform Colin of this.

'Well, well, well, well, well,' Colin said.

Rowland stopped in the doorway. It was at once apparent to him that Colin, noisily suicidal when he left, was now drunk. It was one-thirty in the morning; during an absence of one and a half hours, Colin had contrived to become merry. His long thin limbs were stretched out on the sofa; his auburn hair was dishevelled; he had his feet to the fire, a large tumbler of Scotch in his hand and a Cheshire Cat grin on his face.

'Aha!' he said indistinctly. 'Good news! *Doubly good news!* What a dark horse you are, Rowland. What a *very* nice world this is.'

Rowland took this announcement with equanimity. He removed his wet boots and poured himself a Scotch from a near-empty bottle. He sat down in a squashed comfortable armchair on the other side of the fire. Colin watched him beatifically as he did this.

'Well now, let me guess,' Rowland said eventually when Colin seemed about to achieve nirvana or fall asleep. 'You've had a call from Tomas Court? A fall? He actually likes one of the houses?'

'He does. The first one we saw; the one you suggested the one near the sea. He's just got the v-v. ...'

'Videos?'

'Them. Those. And the punctures. He's looked at the punctures . . .'

'The pictures?'

'Right. And he likes them. He likes them a lot. He likes them a very great deal. He likes them an *inordinant* amount.'

'Well, now that is good news. Your problems are over. Great.'

'You're a true friend, Rowland; that's what you are. A friend in need, indeed.' Colin paused and showed signs of becoming emotional.

'Think nothing of it,' Rowland said. 'I shouldn't care about it, if I were you, Colin. Are you sure you really want that whisky?'

It seemed Colin did want the whisky. It seemed that he might resent being deprived of the whisky. It seemed he was prepared to put up a fight about the whisky. In fact, he would fight any man who came between him and the whisky; fight him to the death. Rowland agreed that this was a very reasonable point of view.

Colin, who had risen uncertainly during this recital of his rights, sat down again uncertainly. He looked at Rowland for some while and, at length, appearing to recognize him, reiterated his opinion that Rowland was a dark horse, a very dark horse indeed. He tapped his nose as he said this.

Rowland found this statement, and the reasons for it, rather harder to unravel. After ten minutes of obfuscation, he had the gist. Some while after the good news from Court, which Colin had immediately begun

celebrating, a woman had called, wishing to speak to Rowland. This woman, whose name was Lynne, or Linda, or possibly Lynette, had a voice and a manner Colin instantly liked. Or, another way of putting it, he and Lynne, or Lisa, had hit it off. They had, it seemed, chatted away as if they were old friends; they had chatted away for *hours*, about Yorkshire, and men who liked walking in the dark, and life, and this and that.

'This and that?' Rowland said, when this account rambled to a conclusion. 'And her name's Lindsay, by the way.'

'Lindsay! The fair Lindsay! I salute her!' Colin drank.

'She's dark, not fair,' Rowland said, his manner slightly irritable.

'Dark *and* fair. With a voice. With a *magical* voice. It has a catch in it.' Colin seemed to be sobering up rapidly. 'I could have listened to that voice all night. She liked my voice too; she said so. She said I sounded very *merry*. I cheered her up.'

'I'm delighted to hear it.' Rowland rose. 'Did she leave a message for me or was she too busy complimenting you?'

'Can't remember.'

'Try. She must have had a reason for calling.'

'She sent her love.'

'Not that. A proper reason. What did she want?'

Colin was relapsing again; the angelic smile had reappeared on his face. 'We came to an understanding,' he announced.

'I doubt that.'

'We did. We *communicated*. Arrangements were made! I remember! I remember!' Colin flailed, then subsided. 'It was a friendly call, she said. She wondered when you might be getting back. You're friends. Friendly friends. That . . .'

'After that, what?'

'I proposed. I proposed marriage.'

'I see.' Rowland gave Colin a long, cool, green-eyed look. 'And did my friend accept?'

'I think she did.'

'Well, accept my congratulations,' Rowland said evenly. 'And now I'm going to bed.'

V

At ten in the morning, that same Saturday, Lindsay's son Tom was calm. He was in the large bed sitting room of his lodgings in a tall, dilapidated but pleasant north Oxford house; from upstairs and from below, where other undergraduates had rooms, came the sounds of music: Mozart from the north side, Dire Straits from the south. He was stretched full-length on a sofa with an unfortunate cerise loose cover, a sofa that even his landlady, the *distract* widow of a physics professor, admitted had seen better days. As much of the cerise as possible was disguised by an Indian cotton throw found by Tom's girlfriend, Katya. Tom had managed to position himself so that he avoided the jab and prod of springs.

On his chest was balanced the third bowl of cornflakes: he had eaten that morning, this one moistened with water, as he and Katya had forgotten to buy milk the previous day. He munched a spoonful experimentally; they tasted edible. He turned a page of the large book propped on his knees, which detailed the economic consequences upon Germany of the Treaty of Versailles.

Across the room from him, Katya, who ostensibly lived in her college, but spent little time there, was pecking away at the keys of her word processor with two fingers. She was wearing a white nightdress and woolly socks; her auburn hair was wound up in a bundle on top of her head, from which precarious knot tendrils escaped. Every so often, she would stop pecking at the keys, push these tendrils aside impatiently, lean forward,

adjust her large working spectacles and glare at the screen. Her essay on George Eliot's *Middlemarch* was due to be delivered to her tutor, the terrifying Dr Stark. It should have been completed the evening before, and would have been, had she and Tom not decided that a late-night six-hour Hallowe'en retrospective of classic vampire movies was rather more urgent than a nineteenth-century novel, or inexorable inflation in 1930s Germany. Then they had had to eat, then Cressida-from-upstairs had arrived with some red wine and Algerian grass; then they had had to sleep – well, go to bed anyway; then . . . Tom considered the subsequent events with pleasure. Two hours of actual sleep? One and a half? He abandoned the cornflakes and half-closed his eyes; the tome on his knees slid to the floor. Ten, ten, ten. Oxford had so many churches, and none of their clocks synchronized. The chiming of an hour could last five minutes or more, and Tom, loving the city, loved it especially for this stretching of time.

Peck, peck, peck went Katya's fingers on the keys. Katya, expected to get a first, as was Tom, was fierce in her typing, fierce in her opinions, this being one of the reasons why Tom had now loved her for two years. No, more than two years, he thought, lazily, stretching out his legs and wriggling his toes. Two years, two months, a week and two days. The length of this period of fierce fidelity pleased Tom; it reassured him that he had not inherited his father's genes; his father, whom he scarcely knew and now never saw, being, as Tom sometimes contemptuously said, a fickle weakling of a man. Two years, two months, a week, two days and – he paused to calculate – twelve and a half hours.

It was at this point, very suddenly, that Tom ceased to be calm. He leaped to his feet as if electrocuted, and stared wildly around the room. The room, he now saw, was a slum, a pigsty. How had this escaped his notice before? The bed in the alcove was unmade; there were

T-shirts, socks and knickers strewn across the floor; on the table was a stack of last night's dirty plates and unwashed wineglasses; there were Rizla papers and obvious roaches in the ashtray. He sniffed; did the room smell of grass? He thought it might smell of grass. He plunged across the room and opened the window wide.

'Oh my God. Oh my God,' he said. 'It's Saturday. It's Saturday now.'

'So?' Katya did not look up; she pecked even faster at the keys.

'Mum's coming. She'll be here any minute. She'll be here in less than half an hour.'

Katya glanced at her watch. 'She'll be late; she's always late. She'll get lost in the one-way systems. You know how she drives . . .'

'Shit, shit, double shit.' Tom was leaping crazily about, stuffing socks and knickers under pillows. 'What if she isn't late? What if she's on time?'

'Stay calm. I need those knickers. What are you hopping around for?'

'I just stubbed my toe. I stubbed it on that evil coffee table. I'm crippled, I may never walk again . . .'

'Straighten the duvet. Pass me those knickers. Just give me two minutes, I'm almost finished. I just have to be really savage about Will Ladislav . . .'

'Who?'

'He's the love interest. In here.' Katya indicated a fat paperback copy of *Middlemarch* from which protruded slips of white place marks, like a porcupine's spines. 'Not one of Eliot's successes. An apology for a man.'

Tom moaned. He emptied the tell-tale ashtray, hid the Rizla papers, picked up the dirty plates and glasses and shoved them into a cupboard. He closed the door, handed Katya her knickers, straightened the duvet, punched the pillows, then stood on one leg like a crane, rubbing his injured foot and looking around him with an expression of wild surmise.

'What else? What else? There's bound to be something else. Mum has X-ray eyes; she doesn't miss *anything*. What about the dust? There's all this dust. Where does all this dust come from?'

'Lindsay's seen dust before. She won't mind. I can't think why you're fussing. Lindsay's cool.'

'Cool? She's my *mother*. She'll go on about washing facilities. Cooking facilities.'

'So? Show her the kitchen; it does exist.'

'The kitchen? Are you mad? She'd *die* if she saw the kitchen. There's a bowl of Cressida's spaghetti on the window sill that's three months old. It has *moulded* practically has legs. It's *breeding* out there . . .'

'I expect she'll understand. I wish you'd shut up. I don't have to skewer this love scene. How can you be a genius and write a love scene like this one? It creaks. There's a ridiculous storm. She can't do storms. She's pinning the storm from one of the Brontës. Charlotte, I think. Where's my *Jane Eyre*?'

'Under that coffee mug, next to the ashtray. Christ, quick, give me that ashtray . . .'

In the act of reaching for it, Tom paused. He could now read the words on Katya's computer screen; they were not kind words. Katya was young, as well as fierce – and they caused Tom some alarm.

'Shit, Katya – you've really . . . You don't mince your words. Castrated? Epicene? Poor Will what's-his-name . . .'

He bent more closely and read the next paragraph. Unconcerned, concentrated, Katya continued to type away.

'Bloody hell.' Tom gave a sigh. 'Is this guy Will supposed to be the hero?'

'Sort of. Maybe. I can't make up my mind. Neither could Eliot, unfortunately, and it shows.'

'You say – this guy Will Whatsit isn't erotic then?'

'He's handsome.' Katya shrugged. 'Passionate. He obeys some of the conventions. But not erotic – no.'

'Do heroes have to be erotic?'

'Sure, heroes ought to exude sex. They have to have sexual power.'

This statement alarmed Tom even more. He forgot about the disorder of the room and the pain of his tubbed toe.

'Sexual power?' he said. 'Come on, Katya - that's a nineteenth-century novel. Closed bedroom doors.'

'No-one screws, you mean?' Katya, still concentrated, typed a final blistering sentence. She leaned back in her chair, removed her spectacles and smiled. '*That* doesn't matter. In fact, it helps. The reader's vile imagination does all the work . . . You want to know what makes a man erotic in a novel?'

'I already know: money and looks. I've read *Pride and Prejudice*. Hell.'

'You're wrong, it's silence: a capacity for silence. Obviously, money helps - or did. Social status. Dark eyes and dark hair . . .'

'Shit, shit, shit,' said Tom, whose hair was fair.

'But silence is vital. If a hero is a man of few words, he remains mysterious, and mystery in a man is *always* erotic . . .'

Tom looked at Katya doubtfully. He did not like this opinion or this conversation. He groaned. Beautiful, dedicated Katya seemed oblivious to his distress; she had picked up a notebook, and was scribbling a couple of *aides-mémoire*.

'Interesting . . .' She scribbled faster. 'The links between eroticism and capitalism. Does the money enhance the virility, or is it the other way around? The silent man as the romantic hero . . . Fascinating. It allows the reader to write the hero's script for him, of course. Maybe *that's* why it works so well . . .' She tossed down her pencil in sudden impatience and fixed Tom with her lovely, and very short-sighted, blue eyes.

'Of course, all that stuff's antediluvian. When I write

a novel, it won't have a hero or a heroine. I have no patience with that sort of thing.'

Tom felt humbled. He made a private vow to be as Trappist as possible from then on. Perhaps it had been a mistake to be so open with Katya? Perhaps, in revealing his heart to her, he had disarmed himself and unwisely divested himself of a vital weapon in the marital armoury. Enigma. Mystery. Silence. Erotic power.

'Shit,' he said miserably. 'I'm a failure as a man. I see it now. I'm like Will Whatsit. I'm a eunuch, a castrated man. I'm epicene.'

That, at last, attracted Katya's attention.

'Are you?' she asked, leaning forward and touching him in a way, and with an immediate result, that gave the lie to this statement. Tom forgot about novels and heroes, and also about the time. Ten pleasurable minutes later, he remembered clocks; he leaped out of bed with a panic-stricken howl.

'Shit. Double shit. Where's the duvet?'

'On the floor. Pass me my jeans.'

'This is terrible. This is appalling. I love you, Katya'

'I love you too. Comb your hair.'

Tom combed his hair, which was now rather longer than when his mother had last seen it. He felt his chin decided to shave, decided not to shave; he found a clean shirt and rushed about the room. While he rushed Katya put things in order. She achieved this, it seemed to Tom, in about fifteen seconds. The dust disappeared; the fluff on the carpet was sucked away; papers lay down in piles; books stacked themselves on shelves. A quick, fierce burst of female efficiency; suddenly chaos no longer threatened and the detritus was gone.

Fifteen seconds after that, Tom was posed on the sofa, surrounded by suitable evidence of undergraduate industry; Katya, also posed with book in hand, was seated opposite, smelling of rose-petal soap, demure in an armchair. For five minutes, all the church bells of

Oxford chimed the half-hour. Both waited expectantly.

'I told you she'd be late,' Katya said a short while later. 'I told you we had time. We could have . . .'

Tom, intent on an heroic, erotic silence, ignored this prompt. He gave Katya a volcanic look; Katya giggled; Tom persevered. Katya's amusement died away; she shifted in her seat, lowered her eyes and, to Tom's triumph, blushed rosily. Tom was just congratulating himself on the ease with which he had mastered this effective new technique – nothing to it, much easier than actually speaking, a cinch – when the telephone rang. Both Tom and Katya expected it to be Lindsay, calling with some excuse for her delay – she had backed into a bollard, imprisoned herself in a remote cul-de-sac, or something similar. It was not Lindsay, however, but her friend, and Tom's friend, Rowland McGuire. Rowland, it emerged, was trying to track down Lindsay.

They spoke for some while, then Tom replaced the receiver.

'Great,' he said. 'Rowland's going to join us for lunch. He's going to drop in on his way back to London. He's got some friend with him . . .'

'A woman friend?'

'No. Some man who was up at Oxford with him. Works in films.'

'Interesting.' Katya gave Tom a sidelong glance. 'Lindsay will be pleased. You don't think . . .'

'No, I don't,' Tom said, in a very certain tone. 'Katya, I've told you a billion times, they're *friends* . . .'

'He might fancy her. I think it's on the cards, and you'd be the last person to notice if he did.'

'My mother? You must be mad. She's thirty-five. She's been thirty-five for quite a while.'

'She's Rowland's age, or thereabouts.'

'That's different. Get it into your head – my mother is not Rowland's type.'

'Why not? She's pretty; she's nice.' Katya paused; she gave a small frown. 'What is Rowland's type?'

'Damozeles,' Tom replied darkly, 'or so I've heard. Beautiful women. *Difficult* women. Women who need rescuing. Rowland's gallant, or so people say.'

'Do they indeed?' Katya's frown deepened.

'People gossip about Rowland.' Tom shrugged. 'It's probably all lies. They say he breaks hearts. In the nicest possible way, of course.'

'He's arrogant,' Katya said, thoughtfully, after a further pause. 'He's one of the most arrogant men I've ever met, but some women – *older* women – like that kind of thing. Lindsay might like it, for one . . .'

'She doesn't. She never stops ticking him off for being arrogant, jumping to conclusions, that sort of thing. But he's clever—'

'Very.'

'And he's kind, so she forgives him. And she amuses him; she makes him laugh, relax. Rowland trusts her, and Rowland's very reserved; he hardly trusts *anyone* . . .'

'I've noticed that.'

'So, they're friends; that's it, nothing more. Why can't you accept that? As far as Rowland's concerned, my mother's an honorary man . . .'

'An enviable fate.'

'Katya, I've *told* you, Lindsay's given up on men in the romantic sense. She gave up years ago. She's not interested and she doesn't need them. She has a good job, a good salary, lots of friends, her own apartment. She's got shot of my grandmother, which is nothing short of a miracle. I'm not there, messing the place up. She's her own woman. Why would she need a man?'

Katya could think of several answers to that question. Not all of them polite. In different circumstances, she would have voiced them, but now, merciful to Tom and condescending to the blindnesses of man and son, she

remained silent. One day, she thought, when the moment was more propitious, she might have to explain to Tom, that he, like most sons and daughters, chose to neuter his mother. She herself avoided this error only because her own mother flaunted her sexuality with an abandon Katya both envied and loathed. This ambivalence Katya also wished to confess to Tom, but the moment had not yet come. She hesitated, then rose and crossed to the only mirror the room possessed – a small one, with a crack in the glass.

Like her mother, Katya was tall; unlike her mother Katya was not thin. She examined her own reflection censoriously; it suddenly occurred to her that her hair might look better down.

'Maybe I should change,' she began. 'I'm not sure about this sweater . . .'

'Change? Why?'

'Oh, I don't know. For lunch, I suppose. If all the people are coming . . .'

'Don't.' Tom also rose. He kissed the back of her creamy neck. He wound one of the auburn tendrils around his finger. 'Don't, you look lovely just the way you are. You . . .'

He stopped, remembering the Trappist vow; screeching of brakes was heard, then a few swear-words as Lindsay attempted to park outside.

Tom clattered down the stairs to let his mother in. Katya remained, gazing moodily at her own reflection. Eventually, after many toings and froings, much unloading and dropping of packages, a laden Tom and a laden Lindsay finally arrived in the room, talking nineteen to the dozen as usual, and breathing fast.

Tom had been up at Oxford only a few weeks for the first term of his second year; this was Lindsay's first sight of his new lodgings. Being optimistic and loyal nature, she began admiring things at once. It was a wonderful house in a romantic street; she loved the tree

outside and the leafy view of roofs and dreaming spires. The room was really spacious; you scarcely noticed the pattern on the carpet once you were inside, and as for that cerise sofa, well, it looked very comfortable, and the Indian throw was marvellous, how clever of Katya to find it . . . What, the kitchen was just across the landing, and shared? How convenient; what fun. No, of course she didn't need to see it, but she had brought this huge casserole thing that Tom and Katya might find useful, oh, and some sweaters Tom had left behind – it might turn cold at any moment – and somewhere there was a poster she'd found, in case the walls were bare, and somewhere, somewhere, damn these wretched carrier bags, there was a bottle of that scent Katya had said she liked . . .

Throughout the confusions of this speech, Lindsay, who could never bear to arrive anywhere empty-handed, elved into bags and tossed wrapping paper around. The gifts, apart from the sweaters, were well received. The walls here *were* bare, and Tom was delighted with the wider poster from *Dead Heat*. Katya opened a large sagon of scent called *L'Aurore* and dabbed some behind her ears. Into the autumnal sunlight of the room came a burst of spring, the scent of hyacinths and narcissi.

Katya kissed Lindsay, then reminding herself, as she sometimes did, that she was going to be a novelist and as such should *observe*, she drew back and watched. She liked Lindsay, and now that she knew her better, she was beginning to see that Lindsay was adept at a variety of actressy tricks. Lindsay rarely entered a room, she *erupted* into it, chattering away, beginning on one sentence, and then, before it was completed, beginning on the next. She might look boyish, with her slim build and her crop of short, curly, dark hair; she might be inches shorter than statuesque Katya; and she might, like a small boy, possess a great deal of engaging and

disruptive energy – but to a degree, Katya suspected, she cultivated this. Lindsay's energy, Katya felt, was channelled in a protective way. The chatter, the hand gestures, the insouciance were a form of disguise – they distracted attention, and Lindsay intended them to do so, from what she might actually be thinking or feeling; and Lindsay, in a muddled, loving, well-intentioned way, was afraid of revealing her true feelings above all; or so Katya thought.

Watching her now, Katya suspected that Lindsay missed Tom desperately, and was desperately afraid he might sense that. For this reason, intent on freeing Tom, she put on an act of loving dissimulation: possibly lonely, she stressed how busy she was; perhaps yearning to stay, she emphasized that this visit was a kind of fly-past, and that she would have to rush back to London immediately after lunch.

Katya was touched by this and by Tom's blindness to the deception. Tom loved his mother and was, in many ways, very close to her, yet he was blind in this respect. This interested Katya, the future novelist. She made herself some crisp, pitying mental notes on the insights and sightlessness of love.

Lindsay's acting ability, she noted, came under further strain when Tom announced that Rowland McGuire and some friend of his from Yorkshire would be joining them for lunch. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to disguise immediate delight – and Lindsay, Katya saw, could not do so. Her eyes lit; faint colour appeared in her cheeks; when she spoke, there was joy in her voice.

'Rowland called? He called here? Which friend? Oh, Colin? Heavens, I spoke to him last night, when I was trying to get Rowland. He was terribly drunk . . . '

At this point, breaking off, Lindsay suddenly remembered that she had brought with her some champagne, to celebrate the new lodgings; it was really for Tom and Katya, but perhaps one bottle might be opened up.

One was opened, which provided Lindsay with opportunities for distraction and conversational Fiddling with the foil, as Tom and Katya fetch washed various glasses, Lindsay gave them an and but edited, account of her telephone call to Yor and its results.

She did not mention – she was too reticent, and ashamed – the minutes she had spent staring unwinking red light of her answering machine previous night. After all, to call Rowland – who left the number in case of emergencies, he said an inexcusable weakness. Shortly before, she had to exorcise his influence, to abandon her hope. Yet working against that solemn resolve was residual unease, the result of her final conversation with Jippy.

Jippy had mentioned 'York', which must surely be 'Yorkshire'. He had advised her to check her machine yet there was no message on that machine. Perhaps the absence of messages *was* the message . . . at that point, Lindsay's nimble treacherous heart gave a lurch. Something was wrong, that was why Jippy had been so alarmed. Could Rowland be ill, or – and Lindsay's quick-start imagination kicked in – or could there have been some accident? A car accident? A fall? A car accident? A car accident? Frayed ropes? Failing brakes? One second Lindsay saw Rowland lying injured where, the next second, he was deep in a gully, dying, with her telephone number on his lips. She stated no longer; with a sweet sense of full justification for this recidivism, she had dialled the York number at once.

'And I got Colin,' she said, pouring champagne. 'He was celebrating. Apparently, Tomas Court is to make a film in England, and Colin's the local manager . . .'

'Tomas Court? Wow!' Her son gave a low whistle.

'Court's been giving him a very hard time, but thanks to Rowland, Colin has finally found him some house he needs. We had a long talk. He told me all about Court and that strange ex-wife of his – she was being stalked, he said, for years, and she nearly had a breakdown, and it led to their divorce . . . Colin was *not* discreet. And then . . .' She paused. 'Then, he started flirting with me. Rather well, considering I've never met him.'

Tom sighed and gave his mother a censorious look.

'And very well considering how drunk he was. We were talking for ages. Rowland was out on one of his strange night walks and Colin kept saying he'd be back at any moment – only he wasn't. And then . . .' She glanced at her son with a smile. 'And then, this was the best bit, Colin proposed.'

'*Proposed?*' Tom's face was now very censorious indeed. 'And he's never met you? He must have been pissed.'

'He fell in love with my voice,' Lindsay said, with dignity. 'We'd been talking about obsession – obsession was in the air, like a germ, and I think Colin caught it. We discussed love, at length, then he proposed. I accepted, of course.'

'I don't *believe* this. Mum, listen . . .'

'We've decided on a spring wedding. Then we're going to spend the rest of our lives together, in contentment and decorum, after some initial years of heady romance.' She paused. 'So, you're about to meet your future stepfather, Tom. I hope you're looking forward to that . . .'

'One question. One little question.' Tom groaned as he refilled their glasses. 'Why didn't you hang up?'

'Certainly not,' Lindsay replied with spirit. 'It's time I remarried and Colin is the man for me. He is very charming. I think I've done well for myself.'

'This lunatic', said Tom, in a gruff tone, 'is arriving

here any minute – with Rowland. Now, I'm praying he was so pissed that he's not going to remember any of this . . .'

'In that case, I shall remind him – at once. I don't intend to be jilted, Tom, I can assure you of that.'

Tom sank his head in his hands. His capacity to be embarrassed by his mother was well developed – indeed, he could be embarrassed by her breathing, or so Lindsay said. He gave a deep sigh.

'Mum, you remember the time you turned up at school prize-giving in that micro-skirt?'

'The Donna Karan? Yes.'

'And you remember that cricket match, when I was out l.b.w., and you argued with the umpire?'

'That umpire was blind as a bat.'

' . . . And then you chatted up the headmaster over tea in the pavilion?'

'Of course I remember. He was a widower. That was such a brilliant move.'

' . . . And then he invited you to lunch?'

'A very *useful* lunch. Consider the consequences.'

The consequences had been that, several months later, the headmaster had been snapped up by Lindsay's svelte but difficult mother, Louise. He was now, therefore, married to Tom's grandmother. Fortunately, this appalling event, which Tom could never have lived down, had happened after he left school. Lindsay, unrepentant, regarded this as one of her greatest *coups*; her son did not.

'All of those occasions, Mum, every single one of them, were embarrassing. They caused me suffering – trauma, I expect. Well, the embarrassment quotient now is even higher. When this Colin maniac arrives, Rowland's *also* going to be here, and Rowland can be unpredictable. He might not like this . . .'

'Too bad.'

'He'll think you're making fun of his friend . . .'

'Make fun of my future husband? I wouldn't dream of it.'

'Mum, I'm warning you, and I mean it. *Don't*. You'll be making a mistake.'

Tom rose. He had spoken quietly, but there was suddenly no doubt that he was in earnest. Lindsay, who had been about to reply, stopped short. There was a silence. Consternation came into Lindsay's face.

'Do you mean that, Tom?'

'Yes, I do. Sometimes – I guess you just push too hard, all right?'

'Tom, wait a second now,' Katya began. 'Lindsay was teasing you. She didn't mean . . .'

'No, no, Katya – he's right.'

For one painful, peculiar moment, Katya thought Lindsay was about to cry. She realized that the act Lindsay put on was far more effective than she had conceived, and that for some reason Lindsay was under strain and deeply upset. She regained control very quickly, however. Looking at Tom, she made a face that was wry and contrite.

'I know, I know.' She gave a sigh. 'I push too hard and I talk too much, and perhaps – it's not very restful. I do understand that, but I was only teasing you, Tom – Katya's right. I liked Colin, and I wouldn't embarrass him. I didn't really intend to say anything . . .'

Tom smiled. 'Admit you were tempted.'

'Yes, I was.' Lindsay returned the smile. 'But I shan't say a word. He's bound to have forgotten, and I won't remind him. I promise to behave *impeccably*, all right?'

It was very rare for Lindsay to break a promise to anyone; with her son, every promise made was religiously kept. Tom, knowing this, at once relaxed; Katya, who had suddenly sniffed the cordite of trouble ahead, assumed that trouble had been avoided. Lindsay

became quieter and was perhaps tense, but the next half-hour passed pleasantly.

Everything was fine, fine, fine, Katya would later tell herself – until the moment when they heard the roar of an engine, and Katya, looking out of the window, saw a long, sleek monster of a sports car pull up.

VI

'It's an Aston Martin,' Tom said, awe in his voice. 'Oh my God, it's a DB5. Classic - I'm not missing this. I'll let them in . . .'

The door slammed shut behind him.

'I didn't know Rowland drove an Aston,' Katya said.

'He doesn't.'

'Well, he's driving one now. It must be your fiancé's I guess.'

'Don't, Katya.' Lindsay gave a wan smile. She joined Katya at the window. Both women watched the tall dark-haired figure of Rowland McGuire emerge himself from the low-slung driving seat. He was wearing somewhat aged clothes, as he had been on most of the occasions Katya had met him; in this case an antique tweed jacket, a dark green sweater and corduroys. Clothes clearly did not interest Rowland McGuire in the least; Katya had decided that this was because Rowland tried to make no impression and cared neither to please nor attract. When Rowland entered a room, he did so as himself, arrogantly indifferent as to whether he was approved, freed, or after or dismissed. Sometimes Katya admired and sometimes she resented this.

Rowland did not appear to be in the best of health perhaps. He looked impatiently up and down the street, then glanced up at the house. Lindsay moved away from the window at once. Rowland with Tom's assistance, then proceeded to lever and push the Aston's passenger from his seat. This took some time.

eventually, like a recalcitrant cork from a bottle, man popped out precipitately, head first. He protested volubly; his face had a greenish pallor and the November sunlight seemed to be paining his eyes. For he donned a pair of dark glasses at once. He walked with exaggerated care towards the door of the house, wincing as Rowland banged the car door shut.

'Your fiancé has a hangover,' Katya said.

'What does he look like, my fiancé?'

'Well, he's not as tall as Rowland, but who is? He's about six feet, maybe six one or two . . . Even shabbier clothes than Rowland. Thin, quite elegant . . . Oh, he's sitting down on the garden wall . . . No, he's standing up again. He's talking to the privet hedge.'

'Just my luck. Not just a maniac, a dipsomaniac. He's bald. Does my fiancé have hair? Black? Brown? White? Black? Katya, tell me he isn't bald. I don't think I'm ready for a bald fiancé . . .'

'No, no, he has rather wonderful hair. Auburn. Very Byronic if you're being charitable; in need of a barbershop if you're not. Hang on. Oh, he has excellent eyebrows – diabolic eyebrows; they go up in peaks . . .'

'Don't be absurd. You can't see his eyebrows from here.'

'I can. He just looked up. Oh – he's smiling. He's shaking hands with Tom. He has a very good smile. A very angelic smile . . . Terribly *pale* though. Alabaster. I think he's about to pass out. What's he doing *now*? Oh, he's sitting on the doorstep. I think he's gone to sleep. Rowland *not* amused. Face like thunder . . . Riot going on being read . . .'

Lindsay made a moaning sound. 'Oh, not one of Rowland's lectures. Katya, I'm not looking forward to this.'

'What a brave man. He's just told Rowland to go off. Rowland not too amused by that either. Wait'

second – yes, he's vertical again. They're coming in. Brace yourself . . .'

Lindsay had ceased to listen, Katya realized. Turning, she watched Lindsay arrange herself, first on a chair, then opt for standing up. She was wearing very understated clothes, as she usually did, despite Tom's allegations. Fashion-pack black, Katya thought, examining Lindsay's flat black pumps; black tights; short, pleated, black skirt and black polo-neck sweater. Katya felt envious, as she always did, of Lindsay's boyish build; she herself was too curvaceous, or – as Katya put it in her more self-critical moments – Junoesque. She pulled down the baggy sweater she was wearing and crossed her arms over her breasts. The eyes of the two women met in mutual understanding; Lindsay's hands flew to her ear-rings, two delicate, pale jade tear-drops.

'Why did I wear this today? I look as if I'm going to a funeral . . .'

'You look fine, Lindsay. You look great. Those ear-rings are really pretty. Are those the ones Genevieve gave you?'

'Yes. Gini's goodbye present when she left for Washington. I – they're hurting my ears; I think I'll take them off . . .'

To Katya's surprise, Lindsay did so – and in an odd, furtive, hurried way too. As footsteps could be heard mounting the stairs, she thrust them into her pocket. She again sat down, then again stood up.

'I hate meeting people I don't know. It makes me so nervous. Shall we open some more champagne, Katya? Yes, let's. I'll replace it another time . . .'

Thus Lindsay created yet another of her diversions, Katya thought. It was not the arrival of a stranger, but of Rowland, that was making her nervous, Katya decided, watching her with some amusement and some pity. By the time the door was finally opened and introductions were being made, Lindsay was again

suffering a useful female difficulty with a champagne cork. This ensured that, within seconds of entering, Rowland McGuire and this Colin Lascelles were both caught up in an argument, Colin advocating shaking the bottle, Tom intervening to protest that wasted half the champagne, and Rowland quietly taking the bottle from Lindsay, kissing her on the cheek, greeting Katya, and opening the champagne without the least difficulty or fuss.

'Coffee might have been a wiser idea,' Rowland said, with a glance in Colin's direction. 'And strong black coffee, at that.'

'No, no, no. The worst possible thing.' Colin was already ensconced on the sofa; the dark glasses had been removed and he was beaming at everyone with a genial delight that suggested he had known them all for most of his life.

'Do you get hangovers, Tom? Katya? I had a hang-over for three years when I was here. Alka-Seltzer; prairie oysters – none of that works. The best cure of all is a pink gin – but a glass of champagne is also excellent. Thank you, Lindsay. It settles the stomach, soothes the brain, reminds the legs how to walk . . .' He looked at Lindsay in a considering way, over the rim of his champagne glass; he hesitated.

'We did speak on the telephone yesterday, didn't we?'

'Last night, yes. But only very briefly . . .'

'Oh good, I thought we did. It's just – well, I was celebrating. A bit of a bender. Then Rowland was up at dawn, as usual, banging on the door, hauled me out of bed, made me pack – I kept asking him, what's the hurry? Another couple of years and I'd have slept it off. Now, I'm still feeling the after-effects: head a bit woozy, memory on the blink . . . So I wasn't sure—' His brow crinkled; he turned a pair of blue, innocent eyes on Lindsay and gave her an anxious look. 'I hope I made some sort of sense when we spoke? Rowland nagged –

he does that. Why did you call? What did you want? Was there a message? He kept it up in the car, for hundreds of miles – I had to go to sleep . . .’

‘There wasn’t really a message. Nothing important. I just wondered when Rowland was getting back. Don’t worry about it. I’d been at a party and I know how it is . . .’

‘A party?’ Rowland handed Lindsay some champagne. ‘And was it good?’

‘No, horrible. Something to do with a movie company called Diablo. Tomas Court’s new production company, oddly enough, Colin. In fact . . .’

‘Did you go on your own?’

‘No, Rowland, I went with Markov and Jippy. I talked to two homunculi, a man called me “babe”, and then I left.’

This précis, or the champagne, which she drank a little too fast, gave Lindsay courage. With a small glance in Rowland’s direction, she sat down on the cerise sofa next to Colin and began asking him about Yorkshire. Within minutes, Colin, visibly recovering, was launched on a saga only too familiar to Rowland. ‘That bloody, bloody man,’ Colin began, and Rowland moved off.

Lindsay listened with excessive attention; Tom and Katya were drawn into a discussion of Court’s movies and psychopathology. After pacing backwards and forwards in an unsettled way for some while, Rowland stationed himself near the shelves at the far end of the room where, with close and apparently pleasurable attention, he began to examine the books.

Rowland often absented himself in this way on such occasions, so no-one took much notice of this. When the discussion moved on to the subject of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Katya rose to fetch the book in question. She found Rowland was holding her copy and examining it – presumably not reading it, since the book was upside down, she noted. As she approached, he corrected this

and turned the pages, the margins of which were filled with vituperative comments from Katya.

'Don't read those,' said Katya, blushing scarlet. 'Rubbish. Childish stuff. I wrote those a year ago, at least . . .'

The remark seemed to amuse Rowland. One of the most disconcerting aspects of the man, Katya thought crossly, was his unreadability. Impossible to tell now whether he was amused by something she had written, or by her, or by himself. Rowland McGuire's intelligence always piqued her, and his proximity always made her physically self-conscious. When he was nearby her hair felt lumpy, she felt over-burdened with breasts and hips. Was it the contrast between her figure (womanly) and the adjective 'childish', that amused him? Or had she written something very stupid? Katya snatched at the book.

'Are you always that unforgiving?' Rowland asked, relinquishing it.

'I don't forgive bad writing, no,' Katya snapped. Another assessing, glinting, green glance was his only response to this. Katya could not decide whether to withdraw or attack.

'Don't tell me you like it,' she said, half turning, and retaining the option of retreat.

'I like certain aspects of it, very much.'

Rowland appeared to have no interest in being engaged further. He took down another book from the shelves – Coleridge, Katya saw – and began reading. Another ability, to make her feel invisible, Katya had learned before. She gave him a cutting look, returned to her room, put her arm around him and sat down on the floor next to him. There she remained, seething and smiling, until Lindsay, stopping Lascelles in mid-sentence, rose and announced with tense animation that they didn't leave immediately – *immediately* – they would miss the table she had booked for lunch.

The restaurant Lindsay had chosen was called Tennyson's. It was a large brasserie, much favoured by undergraduates, serving good, inexpensive Italian wines and the best hamburgers in Oxford. It was very crowded. Approaching their table, in an alcove flanked by potted palms, Lindsay noticed that the floor was oddly unsteady. It occurred to her that she had eaten no dinner the night before and no breakfast that morning; she had just consumed four glasses of champagne on an empty stomach, and this was disastrous. She had something she needed to say to Rowland, a confession that grew more urgent by the second. This confession, which she might have made on the telephone the night before, had she reached him, had to be made before Rowland returned to London and spoke to her editor, his old friend and colleague, Max Flaunders. She began to see that this confession could be made now, over lunch, and in front of the others. There were several advantages to that somewhat cowardly approach, not least that, if Rowland were angry – and he might well be angry – he would be constrained by their presence, and would have to keep his anger to himself.

Sober up, sober up, she muttered under her breath, looking at a wavering table, as waiters fussed with extra chairs. Important, she felt, to get the seating right . . .

Unfortunately, Colin Lascelles also had ideas about the seating; while Lindsay was still arguing silently with a potted palm, he put them into effect. Tom sat at the head of the table, with Katya next to him and Rowland beside her; Lindsay was seated opposite Rowland and next to Colin Lascelles. Rowland seemed indifferent to these arrangements, and preoccupied, but every time Lindsay looked up, she met his gaze. She would have to meet his gaze when she made the confession. She would do it soon, she promised herself. Maybe she should do it when the first course arrived, or perhaps

the second; no, at the pudding stage, that would be the moment, perhaps. Meanwhile, no wine, no whisky, and masses of starch to soak up the champagne.

'And so,' Colin was saying, 'Court hired a private investigator because the police were nowhere, and the man was smart; he always hid from phone booths, and he always called from a pay state . . .'

'Weird,' said Tom. 'And this was going on when you made *Dead Heat*? That puts a whole new complexion on that movie . . .'

'Before, during and after.' Colin nodded. 'It was about round two years after their son was born, and I think it's been continuing ever since.'

'Horrible.' Katya gave a small shiver. 'Are you threatening them?'

'So I gather. Not Court himself, but Nicholas Lawrence, yes. Also the son. So you can imagine . . .'

'Did he use a name? Why couldn't they trace him?'

'He moved around too fast, I think. And he didn't use a name – a false one, presumably. What was it? I don't know. Was it? Something very ordinary – King, I think. Not King. Jack? John? No. *Joseph*, that was it.'

'Joseph?' Rowland said, speaking for the first time in so suddenly that Lindsay jumped. 'Joseph? You're sure that was the name?'

'Yes. Definitely.'

'Joseph?' Rowland said, 'or Joe? As in Joe Kincaid? Joking?'

'Good God.' Colin blinked. 'You're right – I was thinking of Joseph, but there could be a pun. Joking. Joe Kincaid. I never thought of that.'

'Why did you never mention this to me, Colin?' Rowland gave him a sharp glance. 'I've had months to talk to you on the subject of Tomas Court and you never said a word about stalkers, or threats.'

'I know,' Colin blushed, 'and I should have been . . .'

am, but only for a bit. I shall cover the New York collections next week and then I'm owed some holiday time, and then, soon, I'll be free. I'm giving up fashion. I'm giving up journalism. I'm remaking myself. I'm going to write a book: a biography of Coco Chanel, probably. So now you all have to congratulate me and drink to that.'

This announcement *did* produce a reaction. There was a brief, surprised silence, then a babel of questions: How? When? Why? Into this babel, Lindsay continued with her speech.

'I decided months ago really,' she went on. 'I just had to make myself do it. I've been working in fashion too long. I need a change . . .'

'Challenges!' Colin Lascelles put in. 'Quite right! Fresh fields and pastures new! I've *always* believed in that . . .'

'Woods. Fresh *woods* and pastures new,' Katya corrected. She leaned across and kissed Lindsay. 'Well done. You were *wasted* in fashion. I think that's totally brilliant . . .'

'Brave!' Tom said, rising and also kissing her. 'That's great - do I still get my allowance? Only kidding. Wow! I never thought you'd actually do it . . .'

'A toast.' Lascelles refilled glasses. 'To the fair Lindsay - may she succeed in whatever she does next . . .'

There was another buzzing outburst of questions and exclamations; Lindsay found these made her curiously blind and deaf. Then, as the blindness and deafness began to recede, she began to realize: Rowland McGuire had taken no part in this.

He left the food in front of him unfinished. With deliberate care, he aligned his knife and fork on the plate. Slowly and reluctantly, Lindsay raised her eyes to his face; his expression at once made her want to look away, but she found she could not.

'I see,' he said finally, in a quiet voice. 'Is this definite? Have you talked to Max?'

'I've given Max my letter of resignation, and talked to him. Yes.'

'When did you do that?'

'Last week. One day last week.'

'While I was away?'

'Yes, as it happens. That – that has nothing to do with it. I don't work with you any more, Rowland.'

'No, indeed not.'

Rowland's displeasure was very evident. His expression was cold; his tone was cold. Upon the convivial table a frost settled. Lascelles glanced at Lindsay, then at Rowland, his brow puckering, and his blue eyes puzzled.

'Well, I say good luck to Lindsay . . .' he began.

'I've no doubt you would.' Rowland's cold green gaze turned in his direction. 'Since you know nothing about the situation, that's easy enough.'

'Oh, come on, Rowland, what's the matter with you?' Lascelles frowned. 'I'm in favour of change. What's Lindsay supposed to do – stick it out for the pension plan and the gold watch? Nobody does that any more. If she doesn't feel fulfilled working in fashion, she ought to move on . . .'

'Is that the problem?' Rowland's gaze returned to a hot-faced Lindsay. 'You don't feel fulfilled?'

He pronounced the final word with distaste. Lindsay glared at him.

'As a matter of fact, yes. And there's no need to be so supercilious. "Fulfilled" is as good a word as any other. Colin's right. Lots of people change jobs at my age; they have to, these days. I've been doing this too long. I'm sick of offices and deadlines. I'm sick of all the bitchiness and neuroticism. I'm sick of trying to find something new to say about some damn stupid dress. I'm sick of studios and crazy locations. and planes and

hotels. I want to be in one place, and above all, I want to do something else.'

Rowland heard her out in silence. He frowned.

'This isn't one of your snap decisions then? You've been considering it for months? You never mentioned it to me.'

'You never asked,' Lindsay retorted. 'And I don't make snap decisions.'

'Oh, but you do.'

'Well, this isn't one of them. Listen, Rowland, if we are still working on the same paper, yes, I probably could have asked your opinion, but we're not. You edit the Sunday now; you're stuck up in that vast editor's suite, having meetings morning, noon and night . . .'

'We work in the same building; we work for the same group. What is this? I see you virtually every day. Three weeks ago, I was round at your flat and I raised this very issue; I got no response. You could have discussed it any time you wanted, Lindsay . . .'

'Well then maybe I *didn't* want to. Maybe I just wanted to make up my own mind, Rowland. I am capable of that. And you may find it hard to imagine, but there are other things I can do besides edit fashion magazines . . .'

'I'm aware of that, as you have every reason to know.' His remark, quietly made, produced another silence. Patricia, who had been watching this exchange with close attention, saw that Rowland's words seemed to distress Lindsay. Her face had been bright with defiance; she began some defiant reply, then something in his tone, perhaps a note of specific reproach, made her reconsider. She turned to Tom, who had also been watching with growing indignation.

'Tom? I haven't done the wrong thing, have I? I *had* decide.'

'Whatever you decide's OK with me.' Tom shot Rowland an angry glance. 'Mum's had lots of other job

offers,' he went on. 'People are always trying to poach her . . .'

'Oddly enough, I'm aware of that too.'

'There was that TV company, last year. They wanted her to work on a big series – a history of fashion. That American magazine was chasing her. That publisher's been pursuing her for ages. Markov told me . . .'

'Markov. I see. I might have known it.' Rowland's expression hardened. 'Is he privy to all this? Is he behind this decision? That's bloody typical.'

'Who's Markov?' Colin Lascelles interrupted, swiftly. 'Can someone explain? I don't understand any of this. Why is there a problem? Lindsay—'

'Who's Markov? Well now, let me see.' Rowland leaned back in his chair, a dangerous glint in his eyes. 'Markov is a fashion photographer – a very gifted one; a somewhat subversive one. Markov is, without a doubt, one of the most affected men I've ever met in my life. However, he's clever. I even like him – up to a point. The trouble is, Markov is wildly irresponsible . . .'

'No, he's not,' Lindsay interrupted hotly. 'You scarcely know Markov. He's changed a lot since he met Jippy. He's a good, clever man, and I've known him for fifteen years, Rowland. I adore Markov, so you can just stop this . . .'

'I don't deny any of that,' Rowland cut across her. 'Will you listen? I said Markov is irresponsible, and if you think for ten seconds, you'll know I'm right . . . You've always been blind to Markov's faults—'

'Shall we have some more wine?' Colin interrupted, signalling to the waiter. 'Rowland, why don't you calm down? I—'

'Just stay out of this, Colin. Listen to me, Lindsay. Markov loves nothing better than stirring up trouble; he's an inveterate *meddler*, and he loves a drama. Is Markov going to worry if a job falls through? If you're

out of work? All he's interested in is gestures and schemes . . .'

'Just a minute, Rowland. Could I speak?'

'And you, for some reason I'll never damn well understand, actually *listen* to Markov. He comes to you with some hare-brained plot and you buy it. He says "Jump", and you jump. That man has an irrational, disproportionate influence over you, Lindsay, and I can hear him talking now. California-speak. "Fulfilment"? "Challenges"? Give me a break.'

'Damn it, Markov has *nothing* to do with this,' Lindsay snapped. 'And yes, I will have some more wine, Colin, thank you. Amazing as it may seem to you, Rowland, I made this decision on my own – without your help; without Markov's help. I didn't need your advice then and I don't want it now. Stop being so damn pompous. What gives you the right to run my life?'

The final question silenced Rowland, who had been about to interrupt. Possibly her remarks hurt him, Lindsay thought, at once regretting them. Rowland coloured, then turned away. From inside the hot swell of anger within her, she felt misery and shame welling up. Why, why, why did I do this, she thought. For several seasons, as Rowland had implied, she owed him a better explanation than this. Now, at a table with three other people present, and with a pleasant lunch irretrievably ruined, she could see no way of retracting that last unjust statement, or making amends. Then she realized that the reactions of the three other people present were rather different to her imaginings. Tom and Katya, she saw, were suppressing smiles; Colin Lascelles, who had seemed somewhat anxious, was refilling glasses; catching Tom's eye, he winked.

'Cat and dog,' Tom said. 'Tooth and claw. Argue, argue, argue. Sorry, Colin, they always do this.'

'They never agree on anything,' Katya put in. 'Not a movie, or a play, or a book.'

'She tells him he's interfering . . .'

'And arrogant, Tom. Don't forget that.'

'He accuses her of - What does he accuse her of, Katya?'

'I've lost count. Not listening. Not thinking. Talking too much. Being a typical woman - that's certainly come up.'

'Wasn't he domineering? Blind? Insensitive?'

'Definitely.' Katya made a delicate pause. 'And there, of course, Lindsay was right.'

'He had a point too; Mum does *talk*. Never draws breath.'

'Oh, Rowland does as well,' Colin said, joining in with a smile. 'He may take time to warm up, and he may choose his company, but once Rowland *starts* talking, there's no stopping him. Opinions too. When I first met Rowland, he was insufferable. If you *coughed*, he had an opinion. If you *sneezed*, he had an opinion. My sister, who was once very much in love with Rowland, used to say that . . .'

'Enough. That's it. Stop it right there . . .'

 Rowland raised his voice. 'We get the point.'

He hesitated, then smiled, then extended his hand to Lindsay across the table. His green eyes rested thoughtfully, but no longer coldly, on her face.

'I was wrong. I'm sorry, Lindsay. I wish you every possible good in anything you may do. I hope you know that.'

'I'm sorry too. I take back what I said.'

Lindsay clasped his hand; the handshake that then followed was so warm, so friendly, so fraternal, that Lindsay wanted to weep on the spot. Since she could not weep, she drank another glass of wine, and since that made her feel extraordinarily strengthened, another after that.

She waited until conversation resumed and the atmosphere eased. She waited until Rowland, Katya and Tom

became embroiled in an argument first about books, then Thomas Court's *Willow Song*, its connections to *Dead Heat*, and the significance of the spider sequence.

Katya was speaking with force; Lindsay sometimes suspected that Katya felt challenged by Rowland's Oxford first; always trenchant, she tended to become more so when Rowland was present; indeed Tom had once accused her of showing off. Now, she whipped *Othello* into the argument, then harnessed Freud; she crunched Tomas Court's view of women under her chariot wheels, then quoted some German philosopher Lindsay had never heard of, at length. Rowland listened patiently enough until Jung's aid was also marshalled, at which, seconded by Tom, he launched a counter-attack.

The air in the room was altering, Lindsay thought; cigarette smoke, perhaps; anyway, it was now eddying pleasantly, and was assuming a mauvish hue, wafting like mist. Realizing there was a key question she needed to ask, she turned back to the amiable, blue, innocent eyes of Colin Lascelles, and interrupted him.

'Tell me *all* about your sister, Colin,' she said.

Colin did tell her all about his sister, and very interesting it was. This subject, and variations upon it, opened a door, she found. Through that door, Lindsay began to see a younger Rowland McGuire, a different Rowland McGuire. She was busily inspecting these Rowlands, and trying to work out how they related to the Rowland she knew, although, of course, she did not know him enough, when she realized that other, less metaphorical doors must have opened, since they were no longer in the restaurant, but walking past glorious buildings, in a now darkening street. She was arm in arm with Colin Lascelles; he was leading her through a gateway, advancing into a large, misty quadrangle; there were

lighted windows, dark-gowned, hurrying figures; a chapel bell was tolling.

'It was here! It was on this exact spot!' Colin, releasing her arm, waved his own like a windmill, 'Chateau Margaux 1959! Two and a half bottles! And I was still standing up. Then I started to topple – very slowly, like a great pine; an eight-hundred-foot pine. I'd braved the storms for thousands of years, and then some giant took an axe to my roots. One blow! That's all it took. It took me a century to fall. I could see the paving-stones coming up . . . and then Rowland caught me. He saved me! He's been saving me ever since. It's thanks to Rowland that at this exact moment my life makes perfect sense! I have to thank him. Where is he? He was here a second ago . . .'

Colin whirled about, arms semaphoring. Rowland who was standing two feet away, watching this performance with Tom and Katya, moved forward and caught hold of his arm firmly.

'Tom, we may have a problem,' he said.

'That was a wonderful speech, Colin,' Lindsay said with warmth. 'I can see it. I can imagine it. Was it a cold night?'

'Cold? Bitterly cold. The witching hour! It was three o'clock in the morning. The night was pitch-black . . .'

'It was June. You take his other arm, Tom,' Rowland said.

'A pilgrimage!' Colin shrugged off these arms and took Lindsay's instead. 'I have to explain! Oh, God God. Lynne, there's another place I have to show you. It's not far. It's on the way back. It's just round the corner and up the street . . .'

It was neither around the corner, nor up the street but they eventually found it. In an ecstasy, Colin paused on a bridge.

'Lisa,' he said, clasping Lindsay's hands, 'you have wise eyes, d'you know that? You have these beautiful

wise, sad, grey eyes. I could look at your eyes all night.'

'Thank you, Colin.' Lindsay hugged him. 'I think they're grey too – in certain lights.'

'They're *brown*,' said Tom. 'Give me strength.'

'Or hazel,' said Rowland, his manner meditative. 'Tom, you know that sofa in your room? Well, I rather think . . .'

'Down here, darling!' Colin plunged towards some steps. He helped Lindsay down them with great gallantry. Lindsay found herself on what might have been a tow-path. It was very dark. She could smell river water, and then see the gleam of light on its surface.

'This is the canal! Do you see those barges, Linda? Can you see the barges up ahead?'

Lindsay found she could see them.

'People live on these barges, Lynne. It's just along here. It's this one. No, that one! That's it! The one with poppies painted on it. Well, on this barge here, lived a most beautiful woman. She was a painter, I think. My Lady of Shalott. She had long golden hair. What was her name, Rowland?'

'I forget.'

'This was a long time ago, Lisa – you do understand that?'

'I do. Years and years ago, Colin.' Lindsay leaned over the water. Rowland pulled her back.

'Exactly. Decades. And this beautiful girl – I was mad about her. Completely mad. Obsessed. This was when I was an undergraduate – before I met you, of course.'

'Of course.'

'I wrote sonnets! Songs! I dreamed about her every night! If I saw her for two seconds, I was happy for a week . . .'

'A month.' Lindsay gave a deep sigh. 'Longer, sometimes . . .'

'You understand! I knew you would.' Colin embraced her tenderly. 'I wrote her letters, Lindsay . . .'

'But you never sent them . . .'

'You're right! It felt like spring!'

'It did. April. Did it feel like April, Colin?'

'Like April. Like the darling buds of May. I could do anything. I had all this energy . . .'

'You wanted to dance? Sometimes you wanted to dance?'

'I did. Then I'd weep. Just once or twice.'

'Occasionally, Colin. You wept occasionally, when despair hit.'

'That's it! Despair! Oh God, *God*. I'd forgotten that. But I despaired all the time, because she didn't love me; she loved someone else. It was *hell*. Unmitigated *hell*, now I look back.'

'Oh, Colin.' Lindsay put her arms around him. She looked at him very closely. The tow-path was beginning to ripple pleasantly. Colin put his arms around her waist. 'Colin, that's so sad. I know exactly how that feels. Tell me, did you get this sort of *ache*?'

'In the heart? Yes, I did. But none of that matters now, Lindy, because . . . Oh God. You have the most beautiful eyes I've ever seen in my life. What shall we do? Shall we sit down? Walk? Talk? I want to talk to you all night. There's something I have to tell you . . .'

'Time to go, Colin.' Rowland had been listening to this exchange with the closest attention. Now, as Lindsay and Colin began to sit down on the edge of the barge, he took Colin's arm in a firm grip. He led him towards the steps.

'Up you go, Colin. No, no arguments. Tom, if you pull him, and Katya, you push . . . That's it. Well done. Your room's not far, luckily. You go on ahead with him . . . Now, Lindsay, these steps are a bit slippery.'

'They're not.'

'It's deceptive. The light here's not too good. If I just took your arm, perhaps? There. You see? Now, take hold of my hand . . .'

'You have very nice hands, Rowland. They're warm. I noticed your hands the first time I met you; they're strong. Strong hands.'

'It's the climbing, I expect.'

'I worry about the climbing.' Lindsay came to an abrupt halt on the bridge. 'Where's Colin?'

'He's gone on ahead. Don't worry about Colin.'

'All right, but I do worry about the climbing. I was worried last night, that's why I called, I think . . .' She frowned, shook her head, raised her face and inspected Rowland closely.

'I could see you, Rowland. The rope broke. You were tumbling over into this *chasm* . . .'

'Yes, well, that's happened to me once or twice. Really?'

No, not really. Maybe if you lean on me a little, I say.'

Lindsay leaned on him; it felt pleasant. She gave a shiver of delight. Rowland put his arm around her and they began walking again. Dimly ahead of them, on some other planet, Lindsay could see her son, his girlfriend, and someone else. The someone else singing; Lindsay liked the song the someone else chosen; it was a sweet and melodious lament. Neither she nor Rowland spoke; they advanced along a heavenly road; its paving shone; the dark air was placed with lights. Rowland sighed. 'Lindsay, I say,' he said gently. 'Whatever's wrong? You never his.'

My life's changing . . .' Lindsay emitted a sobbing sound which startled her. 'My life won't lie down, Rowland. It won't obey the rules any more. I can't . . . I can't . . .'

What can't you?'

I used to know where north was. Now I don't. It's changed, Rowland. Sometimes it's in the south, or the . . .'

'That happens.'

'I hate it. I hate it happening. Rowland, it makes me afraid. Does it happen to you?'

'Sometimes. Yes, it does.'

'I might cry, Rowland. I can feel it coming on. Oh, damn.'

'I don't mind, Lindsay. Truly. Cry all you like.'

Lindsay did so. She wept piteously for several streets. Then she found they were standing outside a house which looked familiar; its front door was open. Lindsay leaned against Rowland, who put his arms around her. She watched this door; from it, eventually, emerged her son and someone who proved to be Katya. This confused Lindsay, who had been expecting someone else.

'He's out cold, on the sofa. Dead to the world,' said her son.

'Tom, I'm sorry about this—'

'It's cool. No worries, Rowland. Cressida-from-upstairs did it the other week.'

'Now listen, Tom. He may feel he wants to fight you. If he does, say you'll fight him in the morning — then he'll go back to sleep. Coffee when he wakes; lots of it. Oh, and Katya, one thing . . .'

'Yes, Rowland?'

'He may propose, at a certain stage; he's been known to do that . . .'

'So I gather.'

'It's a good idea to accept him; that way you avoid the maudlin stage, which generally comes next. I'll take Lindsay's car and drive her back to London. Meanwhile, just to be on the safe side . . . Lindsay, lean on Tom for just a minute, would you? Oh, she's asleep. Hang on . . .'

There was a pause while Tom propped his mother up and Rowland opened the bonnet of the Aston. He removed the rotor arm and handed this and the car keys to Tom.

'That's usually the best solution. He knows how to put it back, but he can't manage it until he's completely sober. I'm very grateful to both of you. I'll call you in the morning . . .'

There was movement and Lindsay began to wake. Someone soft, who smelled of rose petals, kissed her. This was comforting, although a small voice in Lindsay's mind kept insisting that there was something wrong with that kiss. She was still trying to puzzle out what it might be while her son reproved her, and possibly lectured her, but appeared to forgive her. She had the sensation that this son of hers found something amusing. He was hugged, heard footsteps, then a door shut.

Immediately, as the door closed, two very strong arms encircled her and she found her damp face pressed against wool; the voice in her head now spoke with clarity; a clarion call. Of course, it was not the nature of that kiss which had been wrong, it was the *identity* of the person who bestowed it. She lifted her head and inspected Rowland's features for some while. He did not appear to be angry; he might have been amused. He looked puzzled by something. He had the greenest eyes she had ever seen. She looked at the lamplight on his hair. She looked at green affection, green regret.

'Lindsay, Lindsay,' he said, and smoothed back her hair and looked at her face. 'You really are terribly drunk, you know . . .'

'I am,' Lindsay agreed. 'It feels wonderful, Rowland. Wondrous. Your eyes are very green. Astonishingly green . . .'

'And yours are hazel; not brown, not grey. Around the iris, they're darker. I've never noticed that.' There was a pause. 'What are you doing, Lindsay?'

'I'm kissing your sweater,' said Lindsay, who was thinking I might kiss you. Yes. You're so tall. If you could just bend down a little bit, Rowland . . .'

Rowland did. Lindsay gently kissed his cheek, then

his nose, then, as her aim improved, his mouth. Rowland did not appear to resist. They kissed chastely, in the lamplight, and when they drew apart, Lindsay saw that Rowland's expression was now sad. She made no comment on this.

Her handbag was found, and her keys, and her little car. One minute Rowland was lifting her into it, the next second he was lifting her into what she recognized as her bed. He removed her shoes and neatly aligned them next to the bed. He turned her on her side and covered her with a duvet. He switched off the bedside lamp and then stood in the stripe of light from the hall, looking down at her, his hair ruffled, his hands in his pockets. Lindsay, opening her eyes, then closing them again, thought he still had that puzzled, thoughtful expression on his face. During the night, at some point in the night, negotiating a dream, then a nightmare, Lindsay woke. She did not know where, when, who or what she was: she gave a little cry, swung her legs out of bed and felt her way into the shadows of her sitting-room. At first she thought that it was empty, then she saw it was not. Arms folded, Rowland was seated on the sofa, frowning into space. Lindsay came to a halt in the doorway.

'Would you talk to me, Rowland?' she said.

'Of course.' He held out an arm. Lindsay curled up on the sofa next to him and rested her head against his shoulder. Rowland put his arm around her; minutes ticked.

'So, what shall I talk about?' Rowland said after some while.

'Anything. Ordinary things. I just like to hear your voice.'

'Well, let's see.' She thought he smiled. 'I've been useful. I've washed up one cup, one saucer and one plate - I'm used to washing up ones of things. I checked your answerphone for you, because the light was driving me mad - flash, flash, flash.'

'Oh, I hope someone interesting called.'

'Markov did, from Greece. He said he and Jippy were sitting outside a temple; I forget to which god. Max called. Someone called Lulu-something called, I've written it down . . .'

'Lulu Sabatier? I won't be calling her back.'

'Then I'd called – this morning. So I listened to myself, which is always disconcerting; I sounded like someone else.' He might have frowned; he sighed.

'Then, let's see, I read for a while, but I couldn't seem to concentrate. I thought about Scotland: Skye, where I've been climbing . . .'

'Tell me about where you were climbing. I had a horrible dream. It will make my dream go away. Make me see your mountains, Rowland.'

'Well, you've seen those photographs at my house. I remember you looking at those, the first time you ever came there.'

'I remember too.' Lindsay closed her eyes. She could remember the occasion only too well, since it was then she had first realized she was in love with Rowland McGuire. It was then this entire débâcle had begun; this, of course, could not be said. 'There was one particular mountain,' she went on. 'A mountain with an impossible name . . .'

'Sgurr Na Ghilleann. I climbed it again on this visit. Provided the weather holds – and in the Cuillin the weather can change within minutes, which is why they can be dangerous, of course – there's a place you can reach; it's technically quite a difficult climb, a nasty overhang, but once you're around that – if the weather is clear, and it was last week – you're rewarded with an astounding view. You can look out across the Minch, and each one of the Outer Hebrides islands, you can see them, or their outlines; a black necklace of islands on the horizon. They look . . .'

He hesitated. 'They look too beautiful to be real, like the Hesperides,

perhaps. Then, sometimes, the rain comes in, or a mist appears from nowhere, and you lose sight of them. They disappear, and you think you imagined them . . . ' He hesitated again. 'Whenever I'm there, I feel . . . '

'Tell me, Rowland.'

'I feel as if, finally, I've arrived in the right place, as if questions were unimportant, as if I were beyond questions, maybe. I can't explain, I just like being there, looking at those islands. After those islands, there's nothing, just open sea, thousands upon thousands of miles of sea - sea all the way to America, or to Newfoundland, perhaps . . . '

He stopped speaking and silence fell. The silence, to Lindsay, felt huge and deep, like a benign ocean. She could see herself and Rowland very clearly, sailing across this Atlantic in some small yacht or skiff; the wind caught its sails; for the first time in her friendship with Rowland she felt she could ask questions - questions could be risked.

'Are you happy, Rowland?' she asked quietly, tensing a little, for he might resent this.

'Now?' He showed no sign of resentment. 'I feel happy now, oddly enough.'

'No, I didn't mean that. I meant, generally. Day by day. Night by night.'

'Not really, no. Not in that sense. But I'm happy - enough.'

'May I ask you something else?'

'You may.' He smiled. 'I'll even answer, I expect.'

'Have you ever loved anyone, Rowland?'

'Yes, twice.'

'And what came of it?'

'Nothing came of it.' He paused. 'The first woman I loved is dead; her name was Esther. She was killed in Washington DC, a month before our marriage; that happened a long time ago. And I'

paused again. 'Nothing came of it. It ended some time ago.'

Lindsay heard the decision to disclose no more in his voice; she had expected the closing of that particular door.

'Nothing ever came of my marriage,' she said, in a rushed way, bending her head. 'It took me years to see that. You could say Tom came of it, of course, except that I never think of Tom as coming from my marriage. Tom is my blessing, my gift from the gods. But Tom actually came from — you can imagine, Rowland — nothing special; nothing glorious. A night when I was miserable, when my husband was drunk . . .'

'Don't, Lindsay.'

'No, you're right. I won't. It doesn't matter anyway, because Tom changed my life. He — as soon as I held him in my arms — he wasn't a pretty baby, even I could see that. He had this dark hair then, Rowland. He was like his father with dark hair. I was so proud of that lovely hair, but then later, he rubbed it off, on his pillow, in his cradle, and the next hair that grew was fair, like his father's . . .'

'Lindsay. Dear Lindsay. Don't cry.'

'I don't mean to cry. I don't know why I'm crying. I'm happy really. I love Tom so much. I just wish . . . I just wish . . . I wish he'd grown up with a proper father. Some man — not the man who is his father, because he didn't care, and he should have cared, and I'll never forgive him for not caring for Tom as long as I live . . .'

'When did he leave? Tell me, Lindsay.'

'When Tom was six months old. There was some girl, I think; there usually was. All the time, really. When I was pregnant, before, after. I didn't find that out until later, of course. He — well, he lied a lot.'

'Lindsay—'

'It's all right. I can see it in perspective now; I couldn't then. He turned up again, when Tom was about eighteen months old. He'd turn up, beg to come back, then he'd

stay a day or two, sometimes a week. After a while, I began to see – he only came if he wanted to borrow money, or if he had nowhere else to sleep, so I threw him out. But even then, I still used to write and send him photographs. I sent him pictures of Tom for years. First as a baby, then as a little boy, on holiday, his first day at school – things like that. I was so bloody obstinate . . .’

‘Lindsay, don’t get upset. Here—’

‘I kept thinking, it didn’t matter if he didn’t love me, but he had to love Tom. Even if he wasn’t a good father, he was the only father Tom had, and Tom needed him. So I kept on *hoping*, in this weak, stupid, futile way – and then one day, I suddenly stopped. I realized – he was such a shit. I didn’t like him; I didn’t respect him, and Tom was better off without him. After that—’

‘You never thought of marrying again?’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘No-one asked me, actually,’ Lindsay said, in a small voice. She began to laugh, then cry. ‘Which is just as well, because I might have said yes, and I can see now that would have been a terrible mistake. I’ve had quite a lot of unmemorable lovers, Rowland . . .’

‘So have I.’

‘Dull as ditch-water, most of them. *Prudent*. I had a thing about prudent men, for a bit.’

‘Because of Tom?’

‘I expect so. And – there was one who kept his loose change in a purse; he was pretty bad. There was another one who, when we went out to dinner, he always tipped precisely eight and a half per cent. It took him hours calculating it. I left him in mid-soup . . .’

‘Mid-soup?’

‘I just got up and walked out. It was minestrone. He was talking about pension plans. I think he might have been about to propose, actually, now I look back. I

expect that's why I fled. I don't really like prudent I – I'm not very prudent myself – I expect you've not that – and I didn't really want a husband anyway. I wanted a father for Tom, which wasn't fair on them – I'm sorry about tonight, Rowland. I've been a fool. I'm ashamed. Reeling around on that bridge. I've embarrassed everyone . . .'

'You haven't embarrassed me.'

'Oh, *hell*. Now I'm really starting to cry. I'll make my jacket all wet. Rowland . . .'

'I've got a handkerchief somewhere. Wait, I'll get it. There.' He dried her eyes, then kissed her forehead. 'Now, look at me, Lindsay . . . No, look at me properly. Now, do I look embarrassed?'

Lindsay looked at him for a long time. She looked at his dark hair and his shadowed eyes; any harshness in his features was softened by the half-light. She lifted her hand and rested it against his face.

Rowland took her hand and clasped it in his own. He gave a sigh, leaned back and gathered her more comfortably against him. He looked away across the water. He made no reply. Lindsay, positioning herself so she could look up at him, saw his expression was now blank.

She tightened her grip on his hand and rested her head against his shoulder. She watched the quiet rise and fall of his chest; she let the quietness of the night enter her veins. All the words she would have liked to say, and all the comfort she would have wished to receive, rose up in her heart like a tide. Her feelings were cut off by the utmost eloquence, but words would not contain them. Perhaps silence could speak, she thought, hoping it would. So. She pressed his hand, then raised it to her lips and kissed his knuckles.

'You're still crying,' Rowland said.

'Only a bit. I'll stop soon. I'm glad you're here.'

'I'm glad I'm here too.'

'I wish things were different for you, Rowland.'

wish that things had worked out. That you weren't alone . . .'

'I'm used to it.'

'You ought to have children, Rowland . . .'

'I know that.'

' . . . I watch you with Tom sometimes, and I think — you'd make such a fine father . . .'

'Would I? I hope so.' He hesitated. 'I sometimes wish—'

'What do you wish?'

'Oh, the usual things: that the plot had worked out differently, I expect.'

'Tell me, Rowland; talk to me. You're too reserved; it's not good to be as reserved as you are . . .'

'Maybe not.' He shifted her position a little, so she was curled in his arm, and they sat for some while in silence. Lindsay closed her eyes; was it three in the morning, four? The city was almost silent; its stir had subsided; no cars passed; it was quiet in the dusky room, the only sound their breathing, and quiet in the streets.

After a while, Rowland began speaking again. He continued to hold her hand, and he told her innumerable things, in no particular order, but perhaps, she thought, as they played before his eyes, or swam into his head.

He described the small farm his Irish father had owned on the west coast of Ireland, which he had left when he was eight, after his father's sudden death. He described living in London with his English mother, and his school, his scholarship; then, jumping over years, spoke of his mother's unyielding character and her lingering death. He talked of the purchase of his strange and beautiful house in the East End of London, and then — houses being perhaps the association — he described Colin's search for Wildfell Hall and the house near the sea, which he and Colin had eventually found, and which Tomas Court appeared to like.

From this house, he said, a path led down to a remote

and little-visited beach, a horseshoe between two headlands. There, only a few days ago, while Colin remained at the house, taking his photographs and making his notes, Rowland had walked. Shells underfoot, shells pulverized by the waves; the cry of gulls as they swooped; a heavy sea, the tide racing in and engulfing the rocks.

Lindsay, eyes closed, her body warmed by his, listened to the crunch of those shells underfoot; she listened to the scream of the gulls, the heave of the tide, and listening to them, watching Rowland alone on a pale, shrinking strand, she fell asleep.

The next morning, that morning, when it was light, she woke to a changed Rowland, or perhaps to a more familiar Rowland, a man who had reverted, who was considerate, but distant again, kindly and polite. It was only six, but he was preparing to leave. Lindsay watched him numbly. She felt as if someone had injected novocaine into an artery; novocaine was numbing the muscles of her face; novocaine impeded her breathing and interfered with her voice.

'I haven't been fair to you, Rowland,' she said, finally, when he was almost at the door, the words jamming, then coming out in a rush. He turned.

'I'm sorry. I wanted to say something at lunch yesterday and then I couldn't. I wanted to say something last night – and I forgot . . .'

'Lindsay, it doesn't matter. It's irrelevant now, in any case.'

'It isn't. It isn't. Three weeks ago you made me a proposal, an offer – a very generous one. You gave me the time to think about it, and . . .'

'Lindsay, you obviously don't want the job. That's all right. I was a little confused, when you announced your resignation, your plans. And disappointed, obviously. But I understand now . . .'

'Stop, Rowland. Please don't. I'm so sorry, I hate myself for this. You've shown confidence in me and look how I've repaid you. I sat there at lunch, letting Tom and Colin and Katya criticize you, and I didn't explain the real situation. You could have given me away if you'd wanted to, taken me to task – and you didn't. Oh damn, damn . . .'

She turned her face away to hide her distress. Rowland took her hand and turned her to him.

'Forget about that,' he said. 'Lindsay, I don't care what they said or thought. Listen to me, we've always worked well together. I know you could do this job. Won't you at least think about it?'

'Rowland, no. I have thought about it, and I've decided. I've signed the contract for this book. I'm committed . . .'

'It isn't that. I don't believe you.' He was watching her closely. 'There's some other problem. You don't want to work with me, is that it?'

Lindsay looked away. To accept this job would mean working with Rowland McGuire in the closest proximity; that would destroy all her peace of mind. The only way in which she was going to cure herself of Rowland was to see him less and to put distance between them. She was now even more certain of this.

'Tell me,' Rowland said, when she had not replied. 'Look at me, Lindsay. Is it that you don't want to work with me? Is that so bad a prospect? Why? I know I can be infuriating – you tell me often enough. But we understand one another now; we know one another so well – don't you feel that?'

'In certain ways, maybe. But—'

'We make a good team. We spark ideas off one another. Even the fights are useful . . .'

A glint of amusement came into his eyes, then his expression became doubtful again, and his manner somewhat awkward. 'I'd rather you said, Lindsay. I – well, I didn't

expect you to turn me down. I thought – I can only assume now . . .’

‘Rowland, *don’t*. You know I like working with you; I always did – and you taught me a great deal. I’ve told you that often enough . . .’

‘No, you haven’t actually.’

‘Then I’m telling you *now*. This decision has nothing to do with you personally, Rowland. Try to understand. I’ve spent twenty years, more, in an office. I’ve spent twenty years going to the collections, twenty years catching planes and chasing around the world. I’ve had *enough*, of fashion *and* of journalism; I don’t want deadlines to dictate the rest of my life. Rowland, I never had a choice before – Tom depended on me, my mother depended on me; we had to have my salary, come what may. But now I *do* have a choice. I can write this book I want to write this book – and if it’s a success, maybe I could write others. I’m looking forward to it, Rowland. You wait . . .’ She smiled. ‘In a few months’ time, you won’t recognize me. I’ll have become an archive junkie, a library addict. I’ll be filling up all these notebooks with research . . .’

It was, she thought, a seamless blend of truth and falsehood, and it was effective.

‘An archive junkie?’ Rowland also smiled. ‘I admit I can’t quite imagine that.’ He paused. ‘You promise me that this is what you truly want?’

‘Ah, what do women want?’ Lindsay made a face. ‘I wouldn’t go that far, but it’s what I want to do.’

‘I shall miss you, you know. The office won’t see the same without you. Who’s going to cut me down to size if you aren’t there?’

‘You’ll find someone. You know you never listen anyway . . .’

‘You’re wrong. I did.’

There was a silence. During it, Rowland suddenly seemed to realize that he was still holding her hand; and

released it at once. Exhibiting an indecision that was not characteristic of him, he turned to the door, then back again.

'Lindsay, I'll have to go. I have a mountain of work to get through before tomorrow. The trouble with going away is that the workload doubles when you get back. I'd have liked . . . I have a bad week coming up, meetings back to back . . . When are you leaving for New York?'

'On Thursday. I'm staying on after the collections to do some fashion shoots. Then - Max has been generous about notice, and I'm owed that holiday time - I'll come back after Thanksgiving, maybe. I thought of going down to Washington DC for a few days to . . .'

Lindsay stopped abruptly. She feared that Rowland might query Washington as a destination, in which case she would have to say her friend Gini's name and watch him feign indifference. To her surprise and relief, he did not.

'Washington? I have to go over there sometime too - we're having negotiations with the *Post*. Except, no, it's not likely our visits would coincide. Damn! Thursday? Perhaps - Look, I'll call you later this evening, shall I do that?'

'I'm going out this evening, Rowland,' Lindsay replied untruthfully, staring hard at the floor. The reply checked Rowland, whose air of agitation and indecision increased.

'Yes, well, I'll talk to you before you leave for America. We could - you might like dinner one night . . .'

'I don't think that will be possible. I'm rushing about this week, and . . . I'll see you when I come back, Rowland.'

Steeling herself, Lindsay reached up on tiptoe and briefly kissed his cheek.

'Thank you for everything,' she said, in a steadier

vice. 'You sorted me out, yesterday, and last night. You're a very good father confessor, Rowland. I feel much better now. A bit hung-over, of course . . .'
'Sleep. Get some sleep . . .' Rowland replied. 'Promise me now . . .'

'I promise,' Lindsay replied meekly, and with this assurance, Rowland finally left.

Lindsay watched the door close. Everything and nothing, she said to herself. She found she was trembling with the effort of deception; the unspoken and the unspeakable rose up in a wash of regret. She returned to her sitting-room and looked around her blindly. She had done what she had promised herself she would do, and now Rowland's absence emptied the room of all content.

She touched the cushion he had leaned against the previous night; she touched the sofa-arm where his hand had rested. She tried to remember the strange calm and peace she had felt as he talked to her in those pre-dawn hours; it had been the first, and presumably the last time that he had let her into his life.

Remembering his words, she took out the pale jade ear-drop ear-rings she had removed the previous day and weighed them in her hand. Her friend Gini had given her these ear-rings, and it was her friend Gini, she knew, to whom Rowland had referred the previous night.

Nothing might have come of it, as he had said, but Rowland had been in love with Gini, and she had possibly returned that love. They had had an affair briefly, in Paris, some three years before, after which Gini had returned to her lover, the war photographer Pascal Lamartine. Reunited, they had married and had a son. None of the participants had ever discussed these events, but she had been their mute witness. Possibly Rowland still retained a lingering regard for Gini, perhaps he did not. She would never have countenance

asking him, and she knew he would have given her no answers if she had.

She looked down at the ear-rings, a gift from a friend younger than herself, and beautiful in a way Lindsay knew she could never be. Not for the first time in her life, she protested silently at the unfairness of beauty, an accident which could make the best of men blind; then she thrust the ear-rings in a drawer, out of sight.

It was much later, and only when the church bells began ringing, first one set, then another, a series of answering chimes, summoning a city of non-worshippers to worship, that she remembered it was Sunday, worst day of the week yet again. The endlessness of that particular day weighed in upon her; but Lindsay had learned resilience, and she took comfort in the knowledge that she had executed the first part of her plans. She took greater comfort from the fact that, next Sunday, she would not be here in this empty apartment but in a different city, one she had always loved – New York.

Bright lights, a heavy schedule, no time to think; she was sitting contemplating the advantages of that city when she remembered Jippy's curious parting words. 'York,' he had said, and of course 'York' might indicate a city in America, every bit as much as Yorkshire.

At precisely this moment, her telephone rang; it rang twice, in swift succession. The first call, from some mumbling person claiming to work for Lulu Sabatier, she allowed her machine to field. The second, from an apparently sober and chastened Colin Lascelles, she answered herself.

BONFIRE NIGHT

VII

‘Remember, remember, the fifth of November – Gunpowder, treason and plot . . .’

Rowland, locking his car doors, turned, was about to walk on, then stopped. The speaker, he saw, was a young Bengali boy, aged about ten. He and another older Bengali boy had stationed themselves outside the Hawksmoor church opposite Rowland’s Spitalfields house. Between the boys, propped up against the railings of the churchyard, was a guy, a well-made guy. It was stuffed with newspaper and shredded computer printouts, some of which were escaping from ankles, fat waist and throat. On its feet was a pair of women’s Indian slippers; on its head was a turban; the ensemble was completed by a torn, very English tweed jacket and a tattered Nike track suit. In the dim street lighting, the guy’s face mask grinned at him; from some distance away, a rocket fizzed into the dark sky and exploded in a burst of golden stars, high up.

It was years since he had seen a guy, Rowland realized. When he was a boy, when he first came to London to live, these straw men, these hollow men, had been commonplace in the weeks leading up to Bonfire Night; children stationed them outside tube stations on street corners, outside firework shops. He paused looking at the malevolent mask, and with a rush, his childhood came back. He remembered the gorgeousness and gaudiness of the fireworks themselves, the black aromatic powder that leaked from them; he thought of the solemn ceremony every year, his mother and

himself, wrapped up in coats, alone in a neglected North London back garden, positioning rockets in milk bottles, lining up magic on a garden wall: Vesuvius, Krakatoa. Light the blue touch-paper, stand well back.

He looked at the two boys, who were shivering with cold. This area in the East End of London, always a refugee area, lived in over the centuries by French Huguenots, then Jewish immigrants, was now predominantly Bengali. Rowland wondered if these two boys knew the history of Guy Fawkes and the gunpowder plot, and if so whether it could have any meaning to them: it had little meaning to him. He put his hand into his coat's breast pocket, and the two boys looked at him expectantly.

'The going rate used to be a penny,' Rowland said, with a smile. 'I imagine it's gone up . . .'

The boys exchanged glances; they looked, in a pointed way, at the upturned hat next to the guy on the pavement. It contained a collection of ten and twenty pence coins; prominently displayed, in the centre, was a one pound coin and a fifty pence piece.

'Inflation, innit?' said the older boy, giving Rowland an impertinent look.

Rowland withdrew his hand from his pocket and took out his wallet. The boys tensed. Rowland dropped a five pound note into the hat, complimented them on the excellence of the guy, and then, ashamed at his own sentimentality, walked away fast. Whoops of jubilation and derision greeted this generous evidence of his own gullibility; glancing back over his shoulder as he reached his house, Rowland saw that the two boys had decided, perhaps on the strength of his contribution, to pack it in; they were departing, dragging the grinning corpse of the guy up the street.

Rowland let himself into the cold and the silence of his early-eighteenth-century house. It did not possess central heating, and modern heating systems might have

damaged the panelling, in any case. Rowland had never minded its familiar winter chill, and its calm, its silence, he had always loved. Taking pity on it, buying and rescuing it some fourteen years before, when it had been in a state of ruinous neglect, he had found he wanted to change it as little as possible. The creeping dangers which threatened its structures and its beauties, the damp, the dry rot, the leaking roof and decaying timbers, had been cured. Standing alone in the unfurnished first-floor sitting-room when all this work was finally complete, he had closed the shutters to the tall windows, and for the first time lit a fire. It caught instantly and burned well; its flames burnished the panelled walls and danced upon the bindings of his books.

With the crackling of flames and the creaks of old timbers adjusting to heat, Rowland had had an acute sense of his home's past: he had thought of the French Protestant refugees who had been the first occupants here over 250 years before, several of whom lay buried in the sombre city churchyard beyond, and he had felt that, like them, he was not truly the owner of this house, but its tenant or custodian. It would outlast him, as it had outlasted them. In a new millennium, others would stand here, as he did, and perhaps sense, as he did now, past joys and past griefs, some of which he would no doubt have contributed himself.

This thought, that he was part of the house's continuum, destined to become one of its spirits and whispers, had contented him then. Now, he found he was restless, less calmed by these four walls; for reasons he could not grasp, and was reluctant to examine, the silence and familiarity here now agitated him. He would sometimes have the sensation that the house was waiting for something to happen, that it resented being empty by day, and under-occupied by night. It possessed four bedrooms, only one of which was regularly used; the other three, occupied occasionally by friends passing

through London, had a melancholy reproachful Rowland kept their doors closed, disliking this.

That evening, his first free evening since return from Yorkshire, he had brought work home with him as he usually did. He lit the fire in the sitting-room and waited for the warmth to dispel the house ghosts. The ghosts, of past losses, approximations and ill-timings, hopes that had once fired Rowland, but no longer, were reluctant to depart. They lurked in the corners of the room; angry with them and with himself, he switched on all the lamps in an attempt at banishment. The lamplight was ineffective since, as Rowland knew perfectly well, these ghosts had their being in him; it was his blood they fed upon, and they emanated, grey and disconsolate, from himself.

It had perhaps not been such a good idea, he thought wryly to himself, to have bought a refugee house; it was it wise to indulge the kind of early evening melancholy hundreds of city-dwellers no doubt experienced. He was tired; he felt overworked and hungry – that was why, as soon as the front door closed, he now heard the whispers and reproaches of the dispossessed.

Hunger, anyway, was easily assuaged. Rowland went downstairs to his kitchen – a kitchen Lindsay described as charming but primitive. In one of the old battered saucepans – he could remember Lindsay cooking her scrambled eggs in that saucepan, the first time she came here – he heated up some canned soup. He made himself a sandwich, and some minutes later, found he had eaten it.

The food revived him. He returned upstairs to find the fire blazing, the room warm and the ghosts suppressed. He telephoned Lindsay, who was departing for New York early the next day, and found her number was engaged. In a desultory way, he began dealing with the backlog of mail, which had been reproaching him all week. A month before, he had sent a brief, formal

letter of condolence to Gini, formerly Hunter, now Lamartine, on the death of her father. He had half-expected that a reply, no doubt equally formal, might be here, amidst this pile of buff envelopes; it was not, and he found he could accept this without disappointment; maybe he had begun to acquire indifference.

He sifted through the bills, and found buried among them a postcard in writing he did not recognize, which proved to be from Tom's girlfriend, Katya. She gave a lively account of Colin Lascelles's recovery on the cerise sofa; she requested the details of a book Rowland had recommended over lunch in Oxford, the title of which she had now forgotten, but which she felt was essential for her literature course. She sent love and best wishes, as did Tom, who was out, she wrote, playing in some university rugby match. The words 'rugby match' had been underlined in a scornful way; their inherent absurdity was emphasized by an exclamation mark.

Rowland looked at this missive for some while. Much pursued by females, he had learned over the years to be wary of all communications from women, even those – especially those – that appeared innocent. He frowned. On a postcard, he wrote the name of the book, its author and publisher. He added, 'Best wishes to you both', signed and addressed it, then gathered it up with the rest of the mail to be posted.

He looked at the work he had brought home with him then, discovering it could wait, poured himself a whisky. He put more wood on the fire, and in a thoughtful way examined the black and white mountain photographs Lindsay had referred to, which he could remember he had inspected the first time she came here.

The photographs, attached to a pin board, were the sparsely furnished room's only personal element, apart from its many books. Beneath them were notes Rowland had made which detailed previous climbs of these

particular peaks, routes used, weather conditions and so on. Little tongues of firelight moved across these notes and he recalled Lindsay's complaints about the jargon used here, with its terms – arêtes, corries – which she could not understand.

'It's a foreign language, Rowland,' she had said. 'You'll have to translate.'

'On reaching the Three Sisters north face overhang,' he read now, 'a traverse is needed across the buttress to reach the flake where the wall meets the overhang. The flake is positive; there is a small crack for the right foot, but the left has to smear. Behind the flake, just room for a Number Three Friend, and this can be backed up by a Number Five Rock Placement in the offset crack in the roof. Note, this placement is marginal after rain. Only a dyno can get you to the one substantial hold under the roof, but the swing out on gripping is nasty: 35 metres drop . . .'

Rowland read on, and as he did so, these words opened out the mountains to him; he saw, simultaneously, their immensity and the minute details of the cracks and crevices which made ascent possible. He considered that route and the sense of triumph he had felt on completing it. He considered, in particular, the use of a 'dyno', or dynamic movement, as referred to here. In essence, when effecting a dyno, a climber leaped – and although, to a watcher, that move might appear one of fluidity and acrobatic ease, it was dangerous. There was a moment, the tiniest of moments, when the climber moved through air, up and across the rock-face, springing towards the smallest projection or indentation in the rock, over which, or in which, his fingers could obtain enough purchase to support his body weight. The manoeuvre required nerve and physical strength; it required route knowledge and experience and a very precise degree of judgement. If mistimed, or ill-executed, the climber fell – in which case, his safety

depended on the skill and care with which he had secured his protection ropes.

Rowland considered this manoeuvre, and the crux of this route. Coming to a sudden decision, he picked up the telephone and again called Lindsay.

This time, she answered almost immediately. Hearing her familiar voice, Rowland felt less sure of his reason for calling.

'You've been engaged,' he said.

'Yes, I know.' Lindsay, as she often did, sounded breathless and jittery. 'I - someone from the States was calling me. I'm packing for New York. Why do I pack so badly, Rowland? There's clothes all over the bed and the floor. I can't decide what to take.'

'Take that red dress,' Rowland said, after a pause. 'I like that.'

'Really? It's a bit . . . Are you sure? I suppose it would do for parties.'

'Will you be going to many parties?'

'I might. Yes, probably. But I've lost the knack for parties, Rowland.'

'I suspect I never had it.'

There was a silence, during which Rowland watched a red-dressed Lindsay move across some New York party space. In his mind's eye, he saw her do this very clearly - and she was not unaccompanied.

'I had a postcard from Katya,' he said, with some difficulty, and with detectable awkwardness. 'She wanted the details of some book I mentioned. I gather my friend Colin recovered.' He paused. 'I gather he did at least call you to apologize . . .'

'Oh, yes, he did. That Sunday morning, after you left. He rang first thing - he is *nice*, Rowland. He sent me this bouquet of flowers; it was so beautiful. Roses and lilies and things. It was huge; it used up all my vases. I'm in my bedroom, and it looks like a bower . . .'

Rowland frowned.

'Also those clothes,' Lindsay said, still breathlessly, 'so it looks like a bower *and* a bomb site. Oh, I've just seen a rocket. They're having a firework party next door. There's this enormous bonfire. It's like a war zone here, explosions, fire-crackers going off. Can you hear fireworks, Rowland?'

Rowland listened. He realized that all evening, the other side of some barrier in his mind, he had been hearing muffled explosions, the whine as rockets took off.

'Yes, I can. Just. The shutters are closed though and that blocks out the sound.'

'I love those shutters. Is the fire lit?'

'Of course. Otherwise I'd freeze. Lindsay—'

'How nice.' Lindsay gave a breathless sigh. 'Are you working? Have you had a horrible week?'

'Fairly horrible. It's easing up. I should be working and I'm not; I couldn't concentrate for some reason. I — I just rang to wish you a safe journey . . .'

'Thank you. I'll give your regards to Broadway, Rowland . . .'

'I'd like that.' He paused. 'Give my regards to Colin as well. I haven't set eyes on him since lunch in Oxford.'

'Colin?'

'Well, Katya mentioned that he was about to go off to New York. I'm sure he'll look you up there . . .'

'Oh, he said something about that. He's having meetings with the evil genius, I think, and he's going to be staying somewhere odd — I remember, with some American aunt. Some batty ancient aunt.'

'That'll be his Great-Aunt Emily. She is ancient, but not batty; quite the reverse.'

'Well, I don't expect I will see him, Rowland. Or the aunt. I'll be rushing about . . .'

'Lindsay—'

'Going into ecstasies about dresses and hats. I'm quoting you now, Rowland. You said that once,

years ago, before I taught you to understand fashion . . .

'Lindsay—'

'I was so angry with you when you said that. It took me nearly three years to admit that all your criticisms were right . . . Oh heavens, did you hear that? The enormous explosion; like Semtex. I'm sorry. I'm talking too much. Why do I do that?'

'Because,' Rowland said, in a measured way, 'because you're a woman, Lindsay. Because you think that if you talk fast enough and long enough, I won't hear what you're actually saying. And it does make it difficult. It's like decoding something: it's like listening to Morse.'

'What nonsense. I always say what I think.'

'Do you?' Rowland gave a sigh. 'In my opinion, Lindsay, you say what you truly think even less often than I do, and I virtually never say what I think.'

'You don't need to,' Lindsay replied. 'I can tell what you're thinking whatever you say. I can do that; it's our great strength.'

'Oh really? Then tell me what I'm thinking.'

'That's not fair. I can't see you.'

'You mean you have to see me?' So much for intuition, Lindsay. I'm not impressed.

'Wait a minute. Wait a minute. You ~~smile~~ You're smiling, Rowland, in that ~~way~~ ~~way~~ you do. You're thinking — are you smiling? The ~~hell~~.'

'Yes.'

'You see! I knew I was right. And I knew you were thinking too. You're thinking Lindsay ~~that~~ she's a complete airhead.'

'Wrong. A million miles out.'

'You're thinking about work.'

'Wrong again.'

'Damn, these fireworks must be putting me off. I think you're thinking about Colin about ~~the~~ drunken lunch.'

'Wrong yet again. You may be thinking about Col
I'm not.'

'There's no need to sound so irritable, and I definitely know what you're thinking now. You're thinking, why doesn't this damn woman get off the phone? She's a pest.'

'Utterly wrong. I can give you my word – I've never thought that in my life, not once.'

Rowland spoke with great firmness. There was a silence, then, in answer, a sharp intake of breath; a strange moaning sound came down the line; this was followed by Lindsay, explaining she was moaning in despair. She still had so much packing to do; it was late; she had to be out at the airport at dawn. Rowland interrupted these excuses.

'Where are you staying in New York?' he said.

'The Pierre. I'm staying at the Pierre.'

'Maybe I should call you at the Pierre sometime. You could tell me what I was thinking. We could see if your intuition improves. Then—'

'Then?'

'Then you could call me – when you get back. You could call me when you get back from the airport, after you've closed the door, before you've removed your coat. Is that agreed?'

'All right. Agreed.'

There was a silence; a long silence. Lindsay made a coughing sound, then cleared her throat.

'Why?' she croaked.

Rowland considered. He thought of a call made in Yorkshire, which he had missed. He thought of Colin's remarks to him when describing that call. He hesitated. 'I shall have missed you, Lindsay,' he replied quietly, 'and it's always good to hear your voice.'

Had she said goodbye? Lindsay, replacing the receiver, was not at all sure. Possibly; she could not recall.

because the room was suddenly bright and the whole conversation was whirling about in her head. Its words would not lie still, nor assemble themselves in the correct order. The room was fizzing with words, and the undersides of words, and the spaces between words. The words were protean – they might have meant *that*, and they might have meant *this*.

She began to roam about the room making odd, inarticulate sounds. She clasped and unclasped her hands and stared unseeingly at the chaos around her. Dresses and blouses, trousers, skirts and snaking tights; sentences that led in one direction and then doubled back. She prayed hard and silently not to hope, because hoping was the most painful emotion of all and the one she was most determined to cure. She pinched herself and read herself more of the usual silent lectures, because she knew she had been here before, in this stupid demented state, and she had learned, again and again, just how deluded it was.

Affection was not love, and she had to learn to distinguish the two in Rowland's voice. It was pathetic, pathetic, that a man's voice could produce this effect. Had she been twenty, there might have been some excuse, but she was not twenty, and something was badly wrong with her. Somewhere and somehow the past decades had never happened and she had failed to grow up.

No – she could not accept that. If to outgrow love was to grow up, then she would have none of it; she would be content to remain foolish and immature until the date of her death. So no, she would not denounce or renounce the need or the desire, but she would cure herself of imagining a response where it did not exist. She must stop her own emotions spilling over, so that the words she could not say overflowed into his, and her imagination rewrote Rowland's scripts. On the other hand – and here she felt again an irrepressible delight

— Rowland had liked her red dress; he had said, with great firmness, that he liked, no, that it was *good* to hear her voice. He did intend to call her in America; he wanted her to call him, the instant, the very instant, she got back. And this request, Lindsay found, had a soaring resonance; its wings beat about her heart and her head. Such a glorious night, this, she thought, dancing across to the window and gazing out. There was a moon, a full, high, powerful, pregnant moon, and instead of stars, which the lights of London blocked out, there was the lovely artifice of rocket star-trails, showering gold on wintry gardens, and exploding over the shine of slate roofs.

She had been talking to Gini in Washington, earlier, when Rowland had been trying to reach her. Now, watching these streaking stars and listening to these thunderclaps, it was clear to her that she must, at once, call her friend back.

No sooner thought than done. She dialled Gini's number and spoke with a sparkling precision; she rearranged all the plans they had made less than an hour earlier, and, having done so, hung up and began to repack. Such a transformation: now, she found, the clothes folded themselves into suitcases and lay obligingly flat, shoes tucked themselves cunningly in corners; instead of bulging and protesting and refusing to shut, as the cases usually did, they closed with ease — one touch of the fingers and the locks snapped shut. One last case remained. Inside it, Lindsay prepared a nest of tissue-paper; she danced across to the closet, and on this nest, interleaved with more tissue, she folded her newly beloved red dress.

In Washington, meanwhile, in her dead father's house, Gini had replaced the telephone receiver, and — looking at her husband and half-sleeping baby son — was shaking her head.

'That was Lindsay again, and she sounded completely mad,' she said.

'Lindsay? But you'd only just spoken to her.'

'I know, and she sounded fine then. Now, I couldn't make out half of what she was saying. It's Bonfire Night in England; I could hear fireworks in the background. She was scrambling up all her sentences and she was out of breath; she sounded as if she'd just run a marathon . . . no, panic-stricken. She sounded panic-stricken, as if she'd just been attacked.'

Her husband smiled. He moved across to the windows and looked out at the quiet, charming, brick-paved Georgetown street. He adjusted Lucien's weight in his arms so he was more secure and kissed his brow.

'Oh, you know Lindsay,' he said carelessly, 'she often sounds as if she's run halfway up the Empire State building. Lucien's sleepy - I'm going to take him out in a minute. What did she want anyway?'

'She wanted to cancel her Thanksgiving visit here, I think. Half an hour earlier, we had everything planned. Now she says she may have to rush straight back to London . . .'

'How odd. Did she say why?'

'No, not really. Some garbled excuse.' She gave a small frown and glanced at Pascal. 'I think there's some man at the back of it. She's been quite strange for months . . .'

'Well, I hope there is,' Pascal replied. 'I like Lindsay; she deserves to be happy . . .'

'A man doesn't necessarily provide happiness, you know,' Gini said, a little sharply, turning away. 'Lindsay's lived alone for years. She's perfectly happy as she is.'

There was a small silence. Pascal looked at his wife thoughtfully; she had moved away to the dining-table which she had been using as a desk. It was piled with folders and files, most of them containing the paperwork

attendant on her father's death. This room, like most of the house, was in the process of being dismantled prior to its sale. There were faded patches of wall-paper where pictures had once hung and one wall was lined with packing-cases. He had never liked Gini's father and he had found these necessary weeks in his former home difficult. This, he knew, was even more true for Gini, and he was prepared to make allowances because of that.

'She might not wish to continue living alone,' he said, in a mild way. 'She might even wish to marry again, and marriage can bring happiness, don't you think?'

His wife coloured. 'Of course. I didn't mean that. It's just - Lindsay has no judgement whatsoever where men are concerned . . .'

'I wouldn't say that. Who is this unsuitable man she's interested in?'

'Oh, I don't know. Someone she works with, I think. Pascal, I don't have *time* for this. I have to check through this stupid Natasha Lawrence article I've written and fax it off to her and I just *know* she's going to start raising objections. I wish I'd never said I'd do it. I hate showbiz profiles; this is the last one I'll ever do . . .'

Her husband, watching her change the subject in this way, thought he knew the reason. He hesitated, wondering if he could bring himself to mention Rowland McGuire's name, with all its attendant risks. He decided not to do so, although he now felt certain that McGuire was the unnamed man concerned, for he had heard jealousy in his wife's voice - or possessiveness, perhaps.

Could you be possessive about a man you no longer cared for? A man you had not seen in three years? He doubted it; but then his wife did not relinquish her hold on others easily, even after they had ceased to be part of her life. But there were reasons for that - her relationship with her father above all. It had not been easy for her, he thought, as she bent her fair head over

her papers, to come here to her father's house and discover the degree to which he had eradicated her from his life. So far, they had not found the least hint of his existence – not one photograph, none of the letters she had written him, none of the newspaper articles she had written and religiously sent to him. The thanklessness and cruelty of this angered Pascal; with the death of his father, he had believed that Gini might at last break free of his influence. A sojourn here in this house had shown him that death made no difference; for many more years he feared, his wife would be haunted by her father's indifference and neglect.

Moving across to her now, he drew her against him and kissed her pale hair.

'Send the article off, darling,' he said, 'then come with Lucien and me. It would do you good to walk, get some fresh air. You've been working so hard clearing up this place, writing a thousand letters to lawyers and banks. Come out with us – the sun's shining, it's a beautiful day . . .'

'No, I won't – I'd like to, Pascal, you know I would but I need to check this through before I send it. There are some letters I have to write. If Lindsay *isn't* coming for Thanksgiving, I suppose we could leave here a little sooner . . .'

'We could.' He hesitated. 'And that might be a much better plan anyway, darling. It was never going to be easy, having her here – the place is in chaos. I know you were very set on it, but we can't delay for ever. You'll feel better once you're out of this house. We could show it to friends for Thanksgiving, then we could start work on our book . . .'

'I suppose so.' She moved away from him. 'You'll come, Pascal; I'll come with you tomorrow. But I must get on with this.'

'Do you want me to read your piece before I go?'

'No, I hate it. It's adequate at best. I got nothing

of her. You know the only interesting fact in here?' She gestured at the printout of her article. 'It took fifty-fifty takes to shoot that spider sequence in *Dead Heat* – a Natasha Lawrence is terrified of spiders, or so she said. I thought that was revealing. That sequence is one of the vilest things I've ever seen on film. Why would the ex-husband of hers put her through that fifty-five times? He's a sadist, I think.'

'I doubt that.' Pascal smiled. 'That sequence is very complex from a technical point of view, Gini. There are those mirrors; there's that three hundred and sixty-degree pan. I've seen it three times; I work with cameras and I still don't know how he did it . . .' He paused. 'You're sure you won't come with us? No? Then we'll see you in about an hour . . .'

He went out. With a sigh, Gini sat down at the table, she moved papers and files in a desultory way, back and forth. She glanced over her shoulder, because when the house was quiet, she could never rid herself of the sensation that at any moment the door would open and her father would come in and ask her what right she had to be here, in his house.

She had no right – she felt that. In front of her now were all the files and papers which confirmed her daughterly role: the letters from lawyers and real-estate agents; the letters from the IRS, from brokers, from banks. To these correspondents, she possessed the authority of daughter, executor and sole heir, as certified by a brief cold will made some twelve years before and never revised: 'I hereby give and bequeath to my only child, Genevieve Hunter.' Only her father, she thought, could contrive to leave her everything, yet make her feel disinherited. And she saw him again, as he had been the last week of his illness, when he realized he was dying, and that the years of alcoholism had finally caught up with him. It had been the day before they put him on a morphine pump and he lapsed into

unconsciousness. She had been sitting there, holding his hand, until she had realized that, for some while, he had been struggling to free himself.

'Just for Christ's sake let go of me,' he had said. 'And for the love of God, go somewhere else.'

She knew, with a dull and painful certainty, that those words, spoken with a bitter amusement very characteristic of him, would remain with her for the rest of her life.

Pascal was right, she thought; she had to escape from his house – and the sooner she did it, the better.

She picked up the *New York Times* interview she had written, together with its covering letter, and fed it into her fax machine; she had asked Natasha Lawrence to reply by the end of the following day and to restrict any queries she might have to facts, but she felt no great optimism that the actress would listen to either request.

She glanced towards the windows and the quiet empty street beyond, hesitated, and then drew toward her the file of condolence letters. Only half of these had been answered, although she had set aside an hour each morning for the task. Here were all the gentle fiction from her father's past friends, erstwhile editors and colleagues. They wrote kindly and with ingenuity, avoiding the issue of his drunken, wilderness years; she answered with similar evasions and reticence.

Pushing aside the top-most letters in the file, all of which Pascal had seen, she drew out the one letter she had *not* shown him, the letter received almost a month before, from Rowland McGuire.

The letter was brief, handwritten, and formal in tone. 'I was sorry to hear the news of . . .' Rowland wrote in black ink, on white paper, his handwriting firm and clear. The phrases he used were those of a polite acquaintance, observing the formalities, yet she could not hold the letter in her hand without remembering their brief affair. His letter brought him back – the

strokes of his pen made her see his face and his voice; worse still, they made her remember a particular expression in his eyes, at a particular time. Closing her eyes now, she let herself watch an act impetuously and urgently begun, then repeated throughout a long time. She allowed herself to remember and, to her shame, felt a brief pulse of physical longing for him, a faint echo in her body of past sexual excitement and desire.

This had never happened to her before. With an exclamation of anger and distress, she rose from her chair and began to pace the room. A car passed in the street beyond; the air in the room suddenly felt colder with a choking despondency. Too many ghostly thoughts, and this house was to blame. She remembered her childhood self in the dark at the turn of the stair, the past spilled out of these packing-cases; uncertain, disgorged from these files.

She moved towards the door, then stopped, caught sight of herself in a dusty mirror which had not yet been packed away. There, behind the veiling of dust and mercury scars on the glass, she saw herself as a woman, with pale hair and a striving expression. Examining her, she realized that this woman, with her vacillating gaze, had lost the first bloom of youth. She was visibly in her thirties, and would soon look middle-aged.

Wife. Mother. She mouthed these words at her reflection. She thought of her son, whom she loved with the greatest intensity, and of Pascal, a gentler, older man now than he had once been. Fatherhood bore heavily on him – but she was afraid sometimes, although he never spoke of it, that he regretted the decision to give up photographing wars.

It was the right decision, she told her own reflection. His work had contributed to the break-up of his marriage, and photographing wars as Pascal did was dangerous; it was not a suitable occupation now that

was the father of her child. She looked in the mirror uncertainly, but her face did not reproach her for the decision she knew was influenced by her. 'The right thing to do,' she said, turning away from the mirror. She sat down again at the table, and quickly, before she could change her mind, wrote a brief answer to Rowland McGuire.

Rowland wrote formally: she found she could master this language equally well. A sentence of thanks for his letter; a sentence for her father and the funeral; a brief mention of the planned book; a final sentence for herself, Lucien and Pascal. She ended the letter 'Yours sincerely', as he had done. She was about to fold it into its envelope when the fax machine rang, then whirred. She had been concentrating on her task so deeply that the sound made her jump; she swung around, as if someone unseen had just crept up behind her and touched her arm.

To her surprise, she saw that Natasha Lawrence was already replying. A brief handwritten note from the actress was scrolling out from the machine. She thanked Gini for an interesting interview, complimented her on her understanding of the acting process, and assured her that she had no objections to raise.

This letter made Gini unaccountably uneasy. It was too complimentary; it was oversweet and artificial in tone. The lady doth protest too much, she thought, and wondered why.

Tossing it to one side, she picked up her own letter to Rowland McGuire. On second reading, its tone seemed less unequivocal than she had intended. She would rewrite it tomorrow, she decided, and glancing up, she saw that Pascal and Lucien were returning from their walk. Pascal was laughing and lifting Lucien up on his son, who resembled him so strongly, with the same dark hair and the same grey eyes, was also laughing and chattering away in his touching approximation to

language, a tongue composed of recognizable words and invented ones of his own.

She saw them as if in a photograph, a shutter clicking and freezing this moment in time. As they were then, she would always remember them, she thought; in this she was correct. She would also remember her own immediate response, which was to hide Rowland McGuire's letter, and her reply to it, at the bottom of that condolence file.

In New York, at the Carlyle, Tomas Court watched his wife return to the sitting-room with the faxed *New York Times* interview in her hand. He had arrived here only a short while before, and the atmosphere in the room felt edgy and duplicitous, although he could not have said why.

He was sitting in front of the television set and talking on the telephone to Colin Lascelles in London; as he spoke and listened, he flipped the video controls, and on the TV screen a perfect Wildfell Hall fast-forwarded, rewound, paused. He examined a louring doorway, dark ranked windows, a crumbling façade; he surveyed moorland, then tracked down to a deserted horseshoe-shaped beach, while in his ear, Lascelles's very English voice continued to explain the security arrangements his assistants were making at various English location hotels. Behind and through his words came the pop, thunder and fizz of mysterious explosions. Court covered the mouthpiece with his hand.

'You've passed that article?'

He glanced across at his wife. She nodded, then, as he snapped his fingers at her, handed the pages across.

'You can't watch, listen *and* read, Tomas,' she said, in a mild tone.

'You're wrong, I can.'

She gave a small shrug, then crossed to her son, who was waiting in the doorway with a stout, well

wrapped-up Angelica. Natasha adjusted his scarf and zipped up his scarlet anorak. Jonathan and Angelica, together with some new, recently hired bodyguard nicknamed Tex, were about to make an expedition to feed the zoo animals in Central Park.

Apparently, they did this every Wednesday; apparently, the new bodyguard was a great favourite with everyone, especially Jonathan; *apparently*, no-one had expected Tomas Court until later, and Jonathan would be disappointed if this expedition were postponed. *Apparently*, in the month since his father had last seen him, Jonathan had become obsessed with animals, birds, bats, reptiles and insects, books on which now surrounded Court on all sides. Court looked at the *Times* article and the books somewhat sourly. It seemed to him that *apparently* Jonathan had grown used to being mollycoddled by his mother and all the other attendant women who came and went here; Jonathan was *apparently* in danger of being spoiled.

'For God's sake,' he said, 'leave the boy alone, Natasha. He's going to Central Park, not the North Pole.'

The response, as he could have predicted, was a female closing of ranks, a shushing and scurrying, a furtive maternal embrace. Angelica turned her back on Court; Jonathan was hustled out; the door closed.

Colin Lascelles, Court thought, with a certain dour amusement, returning his attention to the telephone, was now sounding more confident than he had in weeks. The particular game Court had played with him, a game often employed before, had proved effective. Court had wanted to see if Lascelles buckled under pressure, and had he done so, would have discarded him. Lascelles had *not* buckled, and he had finally found a house that was everything Court desired, the Wildfell Hall of his imagination, that place of exile and retreat which, for

nearly two years now, had occupied his thoughts. It had appeared to him in dreams.

One day, he thought, he would perhaps ask Lascelles why he had hired him – a decision reached during their first meeting in that Praeger room when Lascelles, vulnerable, voluble and at ease, had told him that story about a woman encountered on a Qantas flight, a story Court found touching and absurd.

Lascelles probably imagined, he thought, like him, that he had been hired for his professional skills which were considerable; and indeed, those abilities weighed with Court, obviously so. Before even meeting Lascelles, he had viewed every major movie he had worked and talked to numerous directors who knew him. He had acquainted himself with even the details of Lascelles's background: his family, his parents, his schooling and his training.

He had known that Lascelles was the heir to an estate in England, and had been since the death of his elder brother. He further discovered that at the age of eight, and on the death of his American mother, he had inherited a fortune from her family, the Lancasters. That fortune had been held in trust for him, and at the age of twenty-one Lascelles had been a very young man, one who need never have worked again. He had worked, however, and worked hard. That fact interested Court, whose own background was poor.

Court, meeting Colin Lascelles for the first time, discovered that he resolutely avoided all mention of his background; he let not one single detail slip regarding his parentage, his wealth, his privileged schooling, his celebrated home, Shute Court, where his family had lived for over 400 years. Court found that he was a somewhat innocent and engaging man. He could not tell if Lascelles was trying to perfect the classless style of the international movie world, and that that was his goal.

altogether succeeding. He noticed – such details always interested him – that Lascelles had the English gift of appearing elegant and shabby at once. He noticed too that the camouflage of the clothes was imperfect. Lascelles might be wearing jeans and a shirt with frayed cuffs, but the discreet watch half hidden by those cuffs was a Patek Philippe, and the shoes were handmade.

'I first saw her at the Qantas check-in,' Lascelles had been saying. 'I wasn't in very good shape. I had a hangover. It was the anniversary of – well, of my brother's death, actually. I managed to get my self changed, so I could sit next to her, then I saw she was wearing a wedding ring, so I never said a word. I just sat there and looked at her for twelve thousand miles . . .' He had paused. 'So when I read your script . . . I can understand that *hope*. I think everyone secretly believes that one day they'll meet the – well, the right person. Only no-one ever admits it these days . . .'

And then, right then, Tomas Court had decided to hire him – not, ultimately, for his professional abilities, considerable though these were, but because he sensed that this troubled, inarticulate Englishman might understand obsession. The discovery had surprised Court, who believed all Englishmen to be cold-blooded, particularly Englishmen of Lascelles's class.

Court looked across at his wife, whom he had been carefully ignoring. 'Checking the fire-escape situation,' he heard Lascelles say now. Again, he placed his hand over the mouthpiece. He flicked the faxed pages of the *Times* article, written by some woman journalist called Genevieve Hunter, of whom he had never heard.

'Why did you pass this? You scarcely read it, Natasha.' His wife, back to the door, looked at him uncertainly.

'It's only short, Tomas. It's fine. I was careful; I had to be. She'd been talking to someone and she mentioned the Conrad building.'

'She doesn't mention it here.' He gave a gesture

annoyance. 'And it wouldn't have mattered if she had since you're not going to live there.'

'You may have decided that, Tomas; I haven't. And I'm not going to have that argument again.'

'Fine. Drop the subject.'

'I was alarmed when she mentioned' the Conrads Tomas – obviously. People will gossip. Word gets out. And I have to be so careful . . .' She hesitated. Her voice, which had sharpened a moment before and taken on that tense obstinate note he most disliked, now softened and became conciliatory.

'Anyway, Tomas, you'd have been proud of me. I told her I'd bought a house in the Hollywood hills. I made up all this rigmarole about it on the spur of the moment – and she bought it. She mentions that plan, and I knew she would. Journalists always love it when they think they've prised some new information out of you.' She gave a half smile. 'So you see, I can lie quite well, Tomas when I have to . . .'

That reply did not appear to please her husband whom she could never think of as her ex-husband. He scanned the pages, then tossed them aside.

'Maybe. You lie better when I'm scripting you.'

'Do I?'

'Yes, but you're right, the article's fine. She didn't get close; a million miles wide. Look.' He flicked the video controls again. 'Here's your Wildfell Hall.'

His wife, and Court knew he would never be able to think of her as his ex-wife, moved slowly forwards a few paces and looked at the screen. She examined the stern, gabled façade, the moorland, then the track, the cliffs, and the horseshoe-shaped beach below.

'Yes,' she said, on a slow exhalation of breath. 'Yes. Except – the house isn't that close to the sea in the novel.'

'We're not filming the novel; we're filming *my* script from the novel. I need the sea; it's better that way.'

'Maybe so. Maybe so.'

She retreated again a few paces and stood looking at him quietly, her long pale hands clasped at the waist of the grey dress she was wearing.

Quiet as a nun, her husband thought, and with a sense of anger realized that it was a double quotation, from a poem by Milton in the first place, from the taped telephone calls of their persecutor in the second. He thought: the *Collected Works of Milton*; the *Collected Works of Joseph King*. Did the use of such quotations mean that King, who had a flat Mid-western accent, a somewhat mordant sense of humour, and an undoubted gift for language, was an educated man?

King could be lyrical, also crude. The police might choose to categorize him as yet another weirdo, as wacko, as some sleazeball or screwball; Court did not agree. King was subtle and certainly intelligent; his phrases stuck in the mind. In one recorded call, he had described, for instance, this grey dress Natasha was wearing. Natasha, who had been protected from some of King's calls, was not aware of that fact, but King had described the dress, its soft cashmere, the way her body shaped the material, very well.

Something small, fiery and malevolent began to stir deep in the recesses of Court's mind. In his ear, Colin Lascelles had continued to speak all this while. He was explaining that they needed to discuss weather cover, and that he would be arriving in New York the next day, in the morning; he had switched to an earlier plane.

'Come to TriBeCa,' Court said. 'I have a loft in TriBeCa. You've got that address? Come there.'

Lascelles agreed and reverted to the question of security. Court's requirements, he said, had astonished the various hotel managements. They had emphasized that Yorkshire was not like New York or Los Angeles,

and that the crime rate was low. Why, so secure did the guests feel, even their American guests, that they often did not bother to lock their doors . . .

'You've tied your hair back.' Court covered his mouthpiece once more. 'I hate it that way. Undo it . . .

'Now? Tomas—'

'Undo it. I've been away a month. It's not much to ask.' He could see, almost smell, her reluctance. She hesitated, glanced towards the door, then lifted her arms. Her long hair was tied back with a black grosgrain ribbon. Slowly, she untied it and began to wind it around her hand. Blood mounted in her neck, then suffused her face. She lowered her eyes.

'Tomas – Jonathan will be back soon. They'll all be back . . .'

'This new bodyguard – how old is he?'

'Tex? I don't know – young. Twenty-five, twenty-six. He's been protecting some oil billionaire. The agency said—'

'Good-looking?'

'Tomas, what does that matter? He does his job—'

'Is he good-looking?'

'I guess so. He's tall, blond. A country boy. He has a fiancée, Tomas, back home in some little town near Fort Worth. You'll like him—'

'Maybe.'

'Tomas, please – can't you get off the phone? I wanted to talk to you . . .'

'What about?'

He looked at her steadily; Lascelles's words, punctuated by those explosions, now blurred. He waited for the answer, feeling amid the stirrings of emotional anger, the stirring of a familiar desire.

'About that newspaper clipping you sent me. That one they found in Glacier Park. About what the police told you, and the detective agency. You said . . . You said they had checks to complete, and – I have to know

— is he really dead, Tomas? Was it Joseph King they found?’

‘New locks,’ Colin Lascelles said, into Court’s ear, ‘and an adjoining room for the bodyguard. Now—’

Behind his words came the soft thud of another explosion; some atavistic British festival, Court thought; the burning of a traitor in effigy. He sniffed; the air in the hotel suite, purified, humidified, smelt acrid.

‘We’ll discuss it tomorrow,’ Court said. ‘I have to go now.’

He replaced the receiver and looked long and hard at his wife.

The thick, long, dark weight of her hair had now fallen forward; one strand, coiled like a question mark, rested against the roundness of her left breast. Beneath that breast, invisible to all but a lover, his wife had a small mole, a velvety aberration of the skin which he cherished. In his movies, he had always rendered this alluring defect invisible. He hid it religiously with make-up, with lighting, with camera angles, for it was *his* mole, part of his secret knowledge of her. That mole, in some detail, and with relish, King had described. He looked at his wife levelly; King’s knowledge, of which his wife remained ignorant, could have only one possible explanation. Yet that explanation was *impossible*, since his wife recognized neither King’s voice, nor his writing — or so she had told Court many, many times.

‘Do you want him dead?’ he said, his tone cold.

‘Tomas, please.’ She gave a helpless gesture of the hands. ‘How can you ask that? You know I do. I prayed he’d die; and if that’s wicked, I don’t care.’

‘Their enquiries are inconclusive.’ He kept his eyes on her. ‘They need more time . . .’

‘Why? *Why?*’ The colour had now ebbed from her face, and her skin was ashen.

‘They just do, that’s all. It’s complicated.’ He paused, and for a second he could hear King’s voice, mocking,

knowledgeable. Just a fragment from one of the many, many tapes of his calls; the words used were effective – Court could feel the kick and pulse of them in his groin.

Still looking levelly at his wife, he held out his hand to her. She began on excuses at once: there wasn't time, it was too soon, Jonathan would be returning, she would have to leave for the theatre, she needed to talk, just talk . . .

Court scarcely heard her words behind some crackle and hiss in his mind, a sound that could have come from a defective tape, or from a fire.

'Come here,' he said, in the tone which always anteed she would obey him. Still she hung back, he flexed his fingers. He listened to the thud in his id, the bang of his heart.

'It's been a *month*,' he said. 'A *month*. Trust me. I'm here.'

FRIDAY THE THIRTEENTH

VIII

'On the beach,' Tomas Court said.

'But . . .' said Colin Lascelles.

'But . . .' said Mario Schwartz, Court's first assistant director.

Mario and Colin glanced at each other; both were keeping count and so far Colin was winning. He was averaging twenty 'buts' an hour; Mario, limping behind, was averaging fifteen.

'Fucking *hell* . . .' said the neat, grey-haired, bespectacled woman who was sitting next to Court and recording these proceedings in microscopic script. Her name was Thalia Ng; she was one of Court's oldest associates, a woman resembling some mouse of a librarian. One week into his protracted meetings with Tomas Court, Colin was still adjusting to her habitual mode of speech – it clashed with her woolly cardigans.

'On the *beach*,' Court repeated, ignoring these interruptions. 'When Gilbert Markham sees Helen for the first time, he has to see her on the beach.'

'Why?' said Thalia Ng.

'Because I say so,' Court replied, with charm.

'Personally,' Thalia Ng replied, in cosy tones, 'I think Gilbert Markham is a prick, and Helen is one tight-assed bitch. *Personally*, I don't give a flying fuck *where* they meet, but . . .'

The eyes of Mario and Colin locked; Thalia Ng's score was ten and rising.

'They don't *meet*,' Tomas Court fixed her with a cool glance. 'I said he *sees* her. She's down by the sea; he's

up on the cliffs. He *watches* her. She's only just arrived in the neighbourhood and he doesn't yet know who she is. In case you haven't noticed, Thalia, there's a lot of voyeurism in this book . . .'

'Sure, and there's a whole lot more in your script. And OK, I can live with that, but you've now changed your mind four times. *Four times*, Tomas. First, they're meeting on the moors, and I think, Oh shit, been here before – it's 1939, it's Sam Goldwyn's *Wuthering Heights*. *mean, please*, it's Merle fucking Oberon and . . .'

'Sorry fucking Olivier,' Court interjected politely and precisely, Thalia.'

'Then,' Thalia Ng continued. 'Then, like major rework, they meet in Gilbert Markham's house, the same as they do in the novel – big yawn. Then – I'm on idea number three now, Tomas, I'm keeping track of this shit – then, it's night, and Helen's inside Wildfell Hall, and this jerk Markham is creeping around in the dark, trying to get a first look at her, and I'm thinking *Peeping Tom*? *Peeping Tom*, perhaps? Now it's move on. She's on the fucking beach. That beach is giving me problems, Tomas. That beach is saying *French Lieutenant's Woman*, a colostomy bag of a movie. So maybe you'd tell me, before you comprehensively f-bang the schedules yet again, are you *serious*? Are you *sure* about this?'

Tomas Court gave a small tight smile. Colin could not decide if he was annoyed or delighted by Thalia Ng's comments. The suspicion was growing in Colin's mind that these arguments between Thalia and Court were a double act they both enjoyed. He suspected they were rehearsed; he suspected that, right from the first, the script had intended this scene to take place on the beach, and that Thalia knew that. Quite why Court would want to play Prospero in this way, Colin could not decide; all he knew, as the long day wore on, was

Thalia was an unlikely Ariel, and he seemed

destined to play Caliban, Prospero's deformed and discontented slave.

This role was familiar to Colin, since he had once actually played it, aged fourteen, at an end-of-term culture-fest at his public school. He had given a vigorous and, it was widely agreed, triumphant performance, leaping about grunting like a chimpanzee, with a fish in his mouth in the drunk scenes. Even his father, not known for his interest in or respect for theatre, had enjoyed the evening. He had motored up from Shute in his ancient silver Rolls Royce, and sat in the front row, moustache bristling, laughing loudly and slapping his thigh every time he considered Caliban had made a joke.

'By Jove, he's got something, that Shakespeare johnny,' he said to Colin afterwards. 'Bloody fine costumes too. Who was in charge of costumes?'

'Matron,' Colin said.

'Who was that playing Prospero?'

'Hicks-Henderson major, sir. I hate him.'

'Don't blame you. Can't act for toffee. Complete and utter berk.'

Compliments on his own definitive playing of Caliban had followed. Now, Colin drifted off and away to the islands of nostalgia, to a land of lost content where his brother was still alive and all was well. 'Be not afeard'; he heard his own reedy fourteen-year-old voice pronounce. 'Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises, sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not . . .' His head began a slow descent towards the table; sleep gathered him gently in its arms, then Mario Schwartz stuck an elbow in his ribs.

Colin jerked upright, trying to radiate alertness.

'But . . .' he said.

Mario noted this addition to his score; no-one else took the least notice.

'Those schedules are provisional, Thalia,' Court was saying, 'so just stop arguing, and fix it - all right?'

Thalia Ng gave a small enigmatic sigh, and wrote a note in microscopic script. Court stretched and rubbed his fingers.

'Right. Let's move on. Scene eight,' he said. He waited until the director was well into the deprecatory he intended for scene eight. He wondered how long he could decently wait before interjecting another question and whether, in any case, he had the energy. When he was certain Prospero was not looking his way, he pressed his wrist on the edge of the table, then, very discreetly, eased the cuff back against the edge, so that he could look at his watch.

It was now nearly six in the evening. He had been sitting at this long black table, in Court's TriBeCa office since eight o'clock that morning. The previous meeting with Court had been bad, but this was undoubtedly the worst. It began with the news that, after protracted wranglings, Nic Hicks had finally signed to play Gilbert Markham. Nic Hicks, or Nic Prick as he preferred to call him, was the man Colin most loathed in the world. He recalled his meeting with him in a theatre bar; he contemplated the appalling prospect of spending the entire twelve-week shooting schedule in the closest daily proximity with this man: Nic Prick whose conceit was boundless, Nic Prick who whined down to a fine art.

He was just recovering from this blow, announcing to Tomas Court with a small sly smile, he had not known when Thalia reported during a coffee break that Nic Prick had been on the phone, would be arriving in New York City shortly, and sent word that he and Colin must meet *together very soon*. Colin had assumed that, if there was any justice in the world, this had to be the lowest point of the day; he was wrong. He was now frantic, smoking a cigarette, exhausted, frustrated and confused.

On the table in front of him, next to the usual array of Court's asthma inhalers, were piles of different

coloured papers: pink, green, yellow, blue. These were the various schedule revises already made; buried somewhere beneath them, and now altered beyond recognition, was the immaculate location plan he had proudly brought with him from England. Buried somewhere else under this multicoloured litter was the original first draft shooting schedule he had helped to compile in those few heady days of optimism when he first arrived in New York.

This pristine, sensible document, its every detail overseen by Tomas Court, was now in the process of being unpicked, slashed, rent, trampled upon, patchworked and restitched. The alterations made by Court over the previous couple of days had been substantial; today, he had excelled himself. He had juggled locations, so far changing the settings of fifteen major scenes and ten minor ones. Thalia Ng's function, apart from abusing Court by rote, was to keep a record of these alterations, each one of which had a knock-on effect. Cast, crew, availability, transport, accommodation, costs – Colin watched a mile of dominoes topple down; he had long ago lost track of which scene was now happening where; he was starting to feel sick and dizzy, on the edge of some cliff, watching the seas of despair.

Visconti was worse, he told himself. Visconti, a genius, was a total megalomaniac; yet he had managed to work with Visconti. He had worked with a tetchy, ageing, punctilious David Lean, on a film never actually made. He had survived Lean, the quixotic Truffaut, that kung-fu Korean, the lunatic Pole, the deranged Australian, several certifiable Brits, and those two new-wave Germans who needed strait-jackets. *I can deal with this*, he told himself grimly; very few movie directors, in his experience, were men of sweet reason so of course he could deal with it. He would. *However, deal with it a whole lot better if he could have a cigarette.*

'Excuse me a moment,' he said, *rising to his feet*

Tomas Court went on talking; Thalia Ng tapped his arm.

'Colin wants the john.'

'Oh.' Court looked up, his expression preoccupied.

'Didn't Thalia show you earlier? The far end, turn right, first door on the left. Now, that scene you mentioned, Thalia, with Gilbert Markham in the garden at night - I want to keep that, but I'm moving it . . .'

A low groan escaped Colin's lips. He moved away from the table fast. He was supposed to be meeting lovely Lindsay Drummond at seven-thirty. He was taking her out to dinner; this prospect alone had kept him sane all day.

No problem, he thought, negotiating the long, bare improvisatory loft area which comprised Court's main living and working space. The space offended Colin's educated eye: it was bleak and looked unloved; no effort had been made to furnish it; it looked as if Court had just moved in, or was about to move out. Colin avoided various stacks of cardboard boxes - there were piles of them everywhere. A *cigarette*, then he would feel revived and confident, he promised himself. He would return to the table and *contribute*, which would probably amaze everyone, since he had scarcely opened his mouth all day.

Then he would simply announce he was leaving - just like that. The rest of them could go on until midnight if they felt like it - and they probably did; he would be sitting at a quiet table in a quiet, civilized restaurant eating wonderful food and *advising* Lindsay.

He had now been advising Lindsay, on and off, for the past week, whenever he could contrive a gap in his and her frantic schedules. At every opportunity, he had been prompting Lindsay on the subject of her prospective biography, her inadequate advance, her economic pressures, and her hope to relieve these by renting her London apartment and finding somewhere cheaper out

in the sticks. Whenever Lindsay attempted to change the subject, Colin gently led her back to it: he now knew a great deal about Gabrielle Chanel, and Lindsay's hoped-for hovel with the roses around the door.

The role of adviser to Lindsay was not, perhaps, the one he would have chosen, but he had to start somewhere, and he now felt he was perfecting the role. Quiet, concerned, wise, *prudent* – that was the line to take. Colin was aware he was somewhat miscast in this role – quietness did not come easily to him and prudence felt unnatural – but he was trying hard. Colin's experience of women, considerably more extensive than most women assumed on meeting him, told him that Lindsay needed careful handling. She was quite odd anyway (he liked her for this) and she appeared to be in some odd stressed-out state: it was very important, therefore, to take things slowly and not to rush.

Considering what a bad start they had made in Oxford, Colin felt he had a lot of territory to cover, but so far they were making progress, bowling happily along at a prudent speed: this evening, he had decided, was the moment to depress the throttle and accelerate.

He had reached a bare brick wall, a completely bare, brutal, black brick wall at the far end of the loft. Opening a door, Colin found himself in a dark narrow corridor. He turned right, as instructed, and felt about for a light switch. He found one, proceeded a few yards further on, as an ugly neon strip flickered above his head, then he stopped and gaped.

When, directed by Thalia earlier on, he had found his way to the bathroom here before, all the other doors in the corridor had been shut. Now, a door opposite the bathroom, a door which clearly led into Tomas Court's bedroom, was wide open. *Private. Out of Bounds*, pronounced the voice of Colin's rigorous upbringing, but it was already too late.

He had seen through into the bedroom beyond, which

was eerily lit by the bluish neon from the corridor, and by the street lights shining into the room through the wall of metal-framed windows. He could see that the room contained one very large, monstrous bed, draped with a dark cover the colour of dried blood. Next to the bed, on a wheeled table that had a surgical look, was a large old-fashioned recording machine, of the kind that took spools of tape, not cassettes; Colin had not seen such a machine in years. It was flanked by two tower-like black speakers and by a cliff, a precipice, a cascade, a

phototapes. Mounted behind the bed, blown up very large, so the photograph was the size of some Renaissance altarpiece, was the celebrated black and white still of Natasha Lawrence in *Dead Heat*. Colin stared, transfixed. It could not escape his notice that the image had been slashed – a huge jagged knife cut had been made at a diagonal angle, slicing through her body from the left shoulder, with its little crouching spider-like head on the pale delicate jut of her right hip.

'Oh Christ,' Colin muttered under his breath, and took a step back. It then occurred to him that perhaps Mario and Thalia had not seen this, that it might be better if they did *not* see it. Gingerly, he moved forward, intent on closing the door and concealing what he had seen. As soon as he moved into the doorway, a light glowed. A small red light, mounted on some invisible piece of machinery high on the opposite wall, above the bed. Colin looked at it nervously; it was possible that this light was part of some security system, was similar to those body-heat detectors that his father, for instance, had recently installed in the Great Hall at Shute, at Venice. On the other hand, given Tomas Courteney's confession, or predilections, it could be a camera; perhaps he was now being recorded on some closed-circuit television.

Colin blushed from hairline to neck. He would look like a snoop; he now *felt* like a snoop. *Act casual*

Thanksgiving, and it has to be December. It's a twelve week schedule. Does he *know* what Yorkshire's like December? January? Does he *care*? It *rains*. It pisses with rain the entire time. It *snows*. Villages get cut off . . .'

'Cool it,' said Thalia.

'We have a start date! My sanity *depends* on that start date. We're *never* going to start – I see that now. If he moves the whole shoot to California, I won't be surprised. California? What am I saying? Why not Indonesia? Anne Brontë in Ecuador? How about the Zambezi? We could shift the whole fucking thing to the Amazon basin, how about that?'

'Relax. He likes you,' Thalia said.

'*Likes me? Likes me?* He's destroying me. He's ripping up months of work—'

'He always does that.'

'That bloody man is driving me insane. *Nuts*. Twelve hours – nearly twelve hours I've been sitting there and what's been my contribution? *Buts*. But, but, but . . .'

Colin kicked a trash can violently, hurting his foot.

'Listen,' said Thalia, when the echoes of his anguish had died away, 'if you're going to survive this, just remember one thing. I've worked with him ten years and I know . . .'

'What?' Colin cried. 'What?'

'He's the best, OK?' Thalia patted his arm. 'Super cunt, obviously – but still the best . . .'

'He's playing games with me! I know it! I can feel it!'

'So?' Thalia gave a little smile. 'Play some fucking games back. Ciao, Colin.' She gave him a matronly wave. 'Have a nice evening. See you tomorrow. Oh – he wants us an hour earlier. He's altering the end. Seven a.m., right?'

* * *

In her bedroom at the Pierre, Lindsay was getting ready for her dinner with Colin. She was sitting on her bed in her bra and underpants while her friend and senior assistant, Pixie, applied some peculiar pungent gel to her hair. Pixie had taken a liking to Colin, and was exhibiting great interest in the imminent dinner, which she referred to as a hot date. She had decided that, in honour of the occasion, Lindsay needed a complete make-over. This make-over, involving a bath, then the application of various potions, unguents, scents, restorative creams and foot-sprays, had been going on for some while. Lindsay, who had covered six fashion shows that day, was too tired and dispirited to argue. Pixie, born bossy, was taking full advantage of her uncharacteristic passive state.

'Keep *still*,' she said, dragging a comb painfully across Lindsay's scalp. 'I'm *transforming* you, sod it, and I can't do it properly if you keep jiggling about . . .'

'Give it a rest, Pixie. Who cares what I look like anyway? I'm trying to read my goddamn phone messages, and it's not easy when I'm being scalped.'

'Colin cares. You've read those messages five times already. Look left, I need to check the back.'

Lindsay sighed and obeyed. It was true, she now knew these messages by heart. During her absence, Markov and Jippy had called (they were now in Crete; 'Off to the Minotaur's lair any minute,' the message read). Gini Lamartine had called about Thanksgiving arrangements, as yet undecided; some sad person from Lulu Sabatier's office had called (for the seventh time in seven days); various dull, work-connected people had called, and Lindsay's mother had called to suggest a few thousand purchases Lindsay might like to make for her in Saks.

Rowland McGuire had *not* called. He had not called once in the past week. He was, presumably, not interested in testing her intuition after all, or perhaps he had simply forgotten, been distracted. Lindsay's

intuition, ever acute, could put a shape to that distraction. Given Rowland's past conquests, it was likely to measure 34, 24, 34; it would be a great deal younger than she was, and would in a short while be discarded – such was life.

'I don't even know why I'm *doing* this,' she said snappishly.

'You're just nervous. You're having dinner with the very handsome, sexy man. You're about to get lucky. Relax.'

'Handsome? Sexy? Who is this?'

'Are you blind?' Pixie giggled. 'One glance from those blue eyes and my nipples go hard . . . He's delicious.'

'He's *nice*,' Lindsay corrected. 'Kind, gentlemanly, rather old-fashioned . . .'

'He won't be old-fashioned in bed. I can always tell. Oh well, you older women get all the luck . . .'

'I don't even want to go out,' Lindsay sighed. 'I want to stay in, eat chocolates and lie in bed. What's in the air stuff anyway? It smells *weird*.'

'Magic,' Pixie sniffed. 'Yams, actually. And don't worry, the smell wears off after a bit. It's absolutely the latest thing. Eco-friendly, one hundred per cent pure natural ingredients, *and* it attacks the free radicals . . '

'I have free radicals in my *hair*?'

'At your age, Lindsay, you have free radicals lurking everywhere. Face facts.'

Lindsay faced them. She could sense the free radicals rawling around. They had long given up on such minor targets as her complexion, she thought; they were now infesting her head and heart; they were swimming up and down in her blood.

'Turn your head this way . . .' Pixie examined her. Oh yes, – *excellent*. I'm aiming at a *soignée* look, très 1930s *débutante*, with Berlin nightclub undertones. Think Dietrich, then think Nancy Mitford. I want sultry and debonair . . .'

'I've never looked sultry in my life, and I've never felt less debonair. Get a move on, Pixie, I'm fed up with this. My feet feel sticky . . .'

'They're *meant* to feel sticky. It's the papaya juice in that foot-spray. Just wait awhile – you'll feel you're walking on air . . . Hey, your skin is really good, you know that? You on HRT by any chance?'

'Will you give me a break, Pixie? Pay attention: no, I'm *not*. And the menopause is a long, long, *long* way off.'

'Only asking. I didn't really think you were. There's no need to be so sensitive.'

Pixie made a face at her and continued her ministrations. Lindsay sank deeper into the slough of despondency. The menopause, with luck, should be a decade away; on the other hand, as women's magazines never ceased to remind her, it could strike at any time, for like all her sex, she was at the mercy of hormones. Hormones, chemicals, free radicals; why, within her own body a nasty civil war, a guerrilla war was taking place. Pixie, of course, believed that war could be won – but then Pixie was such a believer. She believed in tofu and aerobics and mantras and collagen injections and miracle creams that cost 200 dollars for a very small jar. She believed in the beauty industry, where science and ju-ju interlinked, and she believed in *clothes*. In the gospel according to Pixie, there were very few problems in life that could not be solved by intelligent shopping, and spiritual fulfilment could be bought for the price of a new dress.

Pixie's religion, as Lindsay was aware, had once been her own. If she had never been quite such a born-again evangelist as Pixie was, she too had bowed down before fashion and worshipped at the high altar of couture. Now, finally, finally, she could admit at long last that she had lapsed. Farewell false gods, Lindsay thought, feeling virtuous.

Pixie stepped back, her task completed, and Lindsay turned to the mirror, examining her handiwork. The hairstyle, more intricate than her usual one, was surprisingly effective. Lindsay's gloom diminished.

'You know I think that papaya stuff is actually working?' she said. 'I feel quite refreshed.'

'Sure you do. Now we have to find you something wear.'

Pixie moved off to the closets and began rummaging about. Lindsay stretched and examined her ringed hands, the nails of which Pixie had painted a curious interesting purplish-black. How revealing that Pixie should consider Colin Lascelles handsome, she thought could she be right? She must look at him more carefully tonight.

'Tell me, Pixie,' she said, looking at her with affection, 'will you ever get married, d'you think?'

Pixie was twenty-one. 'No way,' she said.

'What about children? You'd like children one day, expect.'

'Maybe. But only if I'm rich enough. Having killed my mother. That's not going to happen to me.'

'And what about love, Pixie – how d'you feel about that?'

Pixie straightened up with a hiss; she held up her two index fingers in the shape of a cross, as if warding off a vampire.

'Bad magic,' she said.

Lindsay was impressed. She did not altogether agree but she was impressed. Pixie, one of six children, born in Liverpool and brought up in some hardship, had already come a long way. Lindsay, who had given her a start five years before, intended to help her go further. Accordingly, when she resigned, she had advised Max very strongly to promote Pixie to Fashion Editor. Max, who did not consort with lowly fashion assistants but who had glimpsed Pixie – she was hard to miss –

the elevators and corridors at the *Correspondent*, had groaned.

'She has green hair,' he said.

'Don't be ridiculous, that was *years* ago. Now she looks like Susie Parker, supermodel circa 1958. You must have seen her – tailored suits, a little hat with a veil, high-heel shoes, stockings with seams, gloves and a Queen Mother handbag . . .'

'That was *her*?' Max had wavered, then entrenched. 'She's a *child*,' he said.

'She's twenty-one. Fashion editors need to be young. Hire her.'

'I'll think about it,' said Max.

Lindsay had continued her promote-Pixie campaign ever since. Before leaving London, she had conceived a cunning plan which, she had been certain, she could slide past Max. She and Pixie would spend roughly a week covering the actual collections, then roughly ten days in New York on fashion shoots. Over Thanksgiving, Lindsay would take some vacation time and Pixie would return to London. During Lindsay's absence, Pixie could nurse these fashion stories through to press, and Max could see how she progressed.

Lindsay kept these dates and plans somewhat vague, and was careful to present them to Max late on her last day in London, when he was in the middle of a news crisis.

'Fine, excellent,' Max had said, when he finally had time to see her. He smiled a small feline smile. 'In other words, Lindsay, I pay your air fares and your hotel bills at the Pierre for around three weeks, during part of which period you research the American end of your Chanel biography – a biography that has nothing to do with this newspaper. Am I right?'

Lindsay cursed under her breath. 'I'm being paid peanuts for this biography,' she said. 'I won't be able to afford air fares. It would only be the odd hour off, Max.'

'No, it wouldn't. You intend to hole up in son archive and let Pixie handle those New York fashic shoots. Then, when I congratulate you on how good the are, you're going to inform me that Pixie did them, the clinching her appointment.' He sighed. 'Lindsay, yo make a lousy Machiavelli; I can read you like a bool This is out of character; you're the only journalist I know who *doesn't* fiddle her expenses. I've always felt yo lacked creativity in that respect.'

'I'll bet Rowland doesn't fiddle them either.'

'Rowland?' Max shrugged. 'Oh, Rowland's probit wears one out. Ah well, I'm really quite fond of you I'm feeling charming today. OK. Done.'

He scribbled his initials, authorizing these plans with speed that made Lindsay suspicious at once.

'What about Pixie?' she said. Max's manner became opaque.

'I'm still thinking about it. I'm consulting. I haven't ruled out the idea. Not yet . . .'

Lindsay had informed him tartly that this was wise since he knew nothing whatsoever about fashion whereas she knew a great deal and was always right. Max acquiesced to this pronouncement with his usual grace. Lindsay continued to mull this over, to plot and plan, and had finally decided, in New York, the previous day, to inform Pixie. 'The job's yours, Pixie,' she had said, 'if you play your cards right.'

Pixie had blushed beneath her layers of perfect 1958 *naquillage*; then the story came out. As Lindsay well knew, Pixie said, she had a brilliant career plan. She intended to be editing English *Vogue* by the time she was thirty, and American *Vogue* as soon as was feasible after that. Accordingly, half an hour after Lindsay resigned, Pixie had marched upstairs to the sanctum of Max's offices. There, his trio of stuck-up secretaries had first ignored her, then told her to shift. Pixie had not shifted; she had sat there for two and a half hours until

finally, at eight o'clock in the evening, Max had taken pity on her and agreed to see her for three and a half minutes.

'Very Max,' Lindsay said, thoughtfully, working out the time scheme of these events.

This was fine, Pixie continued, since she only needed two minutes anyway. Inside the sanctum, she had informed Max that she had earned promotion, that if she didn't get it she would go to *Vogue*, who had been chasing her for months, and that if she did get it, she would want to make changes.

'Changes?' Lindsay said, in a faint voice.

Pixie had presented Max with a list of these changes, fifteen in number. Max read it, laughed, and offered her a drink. They had then discussed his five children and Pixie's budgerigar. Pixie had decided that, despite his suit and his posh accent, she could do business with Max. The upshot of all this was that, provided Lindsay did not change her mind, the position of Fashion Editor was within Pixie's grasp.

'Oh, and I raised him five thousand,' Pixie added, in a nonchalant voice.

'Five thousand? That bastard. That lying, devious . . .'

'It was *easy*, Lindsay. You could have done it any time. You never push hard enough on the money front. Max is a sweetie, a pussy-cat . . .'

'Yes, with very sharp claws. Make sure he doesn't claw that five thousand back from your budget, Pixie, because he'll certainly try . . . You actually discussed *salary*?'

'Sure. On a putative basis, of course.'

Lindsay, by then coming out of shock, had begun to laugh. She laughed at Pixie's ambition and Max's poker-game skills, and she laughed at her own vanity most of all. Fond as she was of both Max and Pixie, it had not truly occurred to her that she was dispensable. She had assumed Max would fight to keep her, and that Pixie, with luck, might find her a hard act to follow. Her

disillusionment hurt at first. She had been dispensable as a wife, Lindsay thought; now she was dispensable as a mother *and* as an editor. She felt a flood of self-pity at this realization, which she was wise enough to indulge to the full for an hour or two. Then, gradually, her natural optimism reasserted itself. Such lessons were salutary; the little rehearsals life organized for everyone – in the final analysis, after all, death ensured everyone would be dispensable, she told herself.

Now, watching Pixie sashay back and forth between closets and drawers, selecting a costume for a meeting that, alas, was not the hot date Pixie supposed, it occurred to her that Pixie's revelations were doubly useful. Not only had they induced a saintly state of forbearance and wisdom, they had also ensured that there was now no going back. The luxury of changing her mind, a luxury Lindsay was aware she indulged in too often, was ruled out. This was good – now the bridges were burned, the Rubicon was crossed. She at once felt a surge of energy and bounced off the bed.

'That red dress,' she said, 'that's what I want to wear – the red dress.'

Pixie rolled her eyes. 'Per – leaze,' she said.

'What's wrong with it? It's great. People like it. Rowland McGuire likes it.'

Pixie thrust the red dress to the back of the closet. She pulled out a black suit, a white silk T-shirt, a pair of stockings, black shoes with kitten heels, and some fake pearls that looked like Chanel fake pearls in a kind of light.

'Take the bra off,' she said. 'I want *subtle*. Just the occasional hint of nipple, for Colin's sake. Don't argue – *trust*. And never quote Rowland McGuire on clothes to me. I may lust after Rowland, but he knows *nothing* about what makes a woman look good. Rowland should concentrate on women's underwear . . .' She paused, smiling. 'As, of course, one gathers he does . . .'

'Yes, yes, yes.' Lindsay said very fast, removing the bra and diving into the T-shirt. She knew Pixie was about to launch herself on the subject of Rowland's physical charms, alleged sexual prowess and past amatory exploits. This recitative, of which Pixie was fond, and which might or might not be accurate, could continue at Homeric length. Lindsay did not want to hear about Rowland's putative past amours, and she certainly did not want to hear the details of any present ones. Pixie's reading, in any case, was useless; she came at the subject of Rowland from the wrong philosophic and moral viewpoint. As far as Pixie was concerned, Lindsay thought crossly, it was a truth universally acknowledged that any man in possession of a woman's company must be in want of a fuck.

She closed her ears to Pixie's lewd commentary and emerged from the T-shirt red-faced.

'So tell me truthfully now,' Pixie was saying. 'Am I right? Did you and Rowland ever ...'

'What? What?' Lindsay said. 'Certainly not. For heaven's sake ...'

'Pity, because it is heaven, by all accounts. I'd have liked to know if it was true ...' She gave a ~~heavy~~ sigh. 'Just, like, the best sex ever. Eight times a night.'

'Don't be so goddamn ridiculous,' Lindsay began to yank on the stockings. 'No-one does it eight times a night. Less is more, Pixie. Remember that.'

'If you say so, Lindsay,' Pixie replied in the most irritating manner possible. 'If you say so ... For ever narrowed. 'Are you telling me the truth? You're sure you never - not even once?'

'No, I damn well didn't. Rowland is a colleague. Can we change the subject and change it now, please?'

'OK. OK.' Pixie looked thoughtful. 'It's just - I've noticed him *looking* at you, once or twice, and I ~~could~~ have sworn that ...'

Lindsay put on the skirt, the jacket and the shoes.

This took her at least thirty seconds and demonstrative consummate self-control, she felt.

‘What could you have sworn?’ she said.

‘Nothing, nothing. Put it this way, *maybe* he was admiring your work, but I got a rather different impression . . .’

‘Twaddle,’ Lindsay said, with firmness. ‘Too Romantic drivel. When was this?’

‘Oh, back in the summer some time . . .’ Pixie made an airy gesture. ‘You were wearing that cream dress.’

‘Really? I’ve always liked that dress.’

‘And another occasion – when you were going straight to the theatre with him from work, September some time?’

‘I remember vaguely. September the eighth.’

‘He helped you on with your coat, and I caught the look on his face . . .’ Pixie shrugged. ‘I was probably imagining it. You were putting him down as usual, telling him how arrogant he is – that’s why you didn’t notice, I expect.’

‘Putting him down?’ Lindsay began, frowning. ‘Not Pixie – I don’t do that . . .’

‘You never *stop* doing it, Lindsay.’ Pixie gave her a hard look. ‘I know you don’t mean it, and so does Rowland most of the time, but you’ve got a wicked tongue and you hurt him sometimes. Pity about that – you might have been in there with a chance . . .’

Lindsay turned to look at her own reflection. Should *silence* that tongue of hers, she thought; she would cut that tongue out if necessary. Never ever again, no matter how provoked, would she give Rowland MacGuire a sharp answer. From now on, in her capacity as his friend, of course, she would speak with a becoming, a womanly sweetness; she would anoint Rowland with the balm of her female discourse . . . I shall be *decent*, she resolved, and not just to Rowland, but to the male sex. Perhaps a certain tartness, even

newishness, had been her problem all along, she thought. And how astonishing that Pixie, whose instincts were usually acute for such nuances, should think she might have been in there with a chance.

Resolving to reform, and to start practising this new mildness of tongue immediately – she could practise on Colin over dinner, she realized; how fortunate – she executed a little pirouette. Pixie examined her, critically, from head to foot. The two women's eyes met in the mirror; both smiled.

'Well, I have to say it – you look great. I've improved you no end. Your skin's radiant, your eyes are shining . . . Quite a transformation.' Pixie gave her a sidelong glance. 'I can't take all the credit, there must be another reason . . . Anticipation, perhaps?'

'What?' Lindsay looked at her blankly. 'Oh, of Colin, you mean? Well, it will be nice to have a quiet dinner somewhere . . .'

'Quiet, huh?' Pixie smiled. 'You like him, maybe? I wouldn't blame you. Thin but Byronic. Nice butt. *Wild* hair. Great line in Levis. Well hung. Dresses to the left – that's always a good sign . . .'

'How observant you are, Pixie. I must remember that.'

'And quite an operator too, I'd say . . .'

'An operator?' Lindsay shook her head vehemently.

'No, Pixie, you've got hold of the wrong end of the stick. He's sweet. Volatile. A bit naïve. Not very sure of himself . . .'

'Oh yeah? Like, he finds out what flight you're on, and switches to it himself. Then he chats up that stewardess at Heathrow – I watched him do it, Lindsay – and gets you both bumped up to First Class? I've seen him with you, in the bar, gazing at you with those innocent blue eyes, looking like butter wouldn't melt in his mouth . . . I read this man, Lindsay, and I know exactly what he's after.' She giggled. 'And if I were you, I'd give it to him. After dinner tonight.'

Lindsay listened to this speech in thoughtful silence. From the vantage point of her new-won maturity and saintliness of character, she gave poor one-track-mind Pixie a pitying look.

'Pixie,' she said, 'you're getting cynical, you know that? When you're older, you'll understand. Sometimes men and women like to meet and simply *talk*. There is no hidden agenda . . .'

Pixie gave a snort. Some of Lindsay's new saintliness deserted her.

'Look, Pixie,' she continued, the sweetness of tongue also momentarily failing her, 'you know where we're going after dinner? We are going up town to this apartment he's staying in. There, Pixie, I'm going to meet his aunt – his great-aunt to be precise – because, God alone knows why, she's expressed an interest in being introduced. Now I hate to disabuse you, but she's around eighty-five years old, so I scarcely think . . .'

'Wow! You're meeting his *aunt*?' Pixie appeared to be thinking fast. Her face lit. 'Well, what d'you know, this must be *serious*. That's good. That's great. I'm really pleased for you, Lindsay. I'm getting the picture now – like, this could be *long-term*, I mean, several months, right? Lucky we did the make-over; this is obviously the *big night*. I see it all . . . You charm the old lady, get her *approval*, so to speak, then it's good night to grandma . . . He brings you back here to the Pierre, like the gentleman he is, then it's soft lights, sweet nothings . . .' Pixie took her hand in a confiding way. 'You'd like me to lend you some grass, maybe? I have a stash downstairs. It can help with a first fuck sometimes, I find; kind of eases all the tensions, revs you up for the *second* fuck, makes sure it goes all right . . .'

At this, saintliness deserted Lindsay completely. She snatched her hand back.

'Are you totally mad, Pixie? Stone-deaf? How many times do I have to say this? It's dinner, it's the

great-aunt's, it's back to the future. I'm not
my lips, Pixie: no fucking. Give you a hint.

Pixie was mortally and morosely offended. She gave
Lindsay a look of shocked disbelief. She made no
remarks about women who traded their bodies for
virtue, then stalked to the door.

'Poor Colin,' she said. 'There is no man and nothing
Lindsay. I'm disappointed in you.' She turned the door
'You know what I call behaviour like that?

'Don't bother telling me,' Lindsay began.

'I call it fucking immoral.' Pixie pulled Lindsay out
through the door and slamming it.

Colin's idea of a quiet restaurant had proved to be on East 55th Street. The place, *Perdu*, had long been famous and was very busy indeed. Realizing that it was their last chance, Lindsay came to a halt on the sidewalk in front of a small pinkish entrance canopy. She was struck by this choice was an extravagant one. The restaurant was celebrated for being very expensive. It was World debt, when she remembered the very sweetness of tongue.

She rephrased. 'Won't this be - well, a fine place
Colin?' she said.

Colin looked at her and replied. 'This is a very nice place
not appear to be familiar to him.

'Oh, I don't think so,' he said. 'The food is wonderful
like it. The food's wonderful. The service is excellent
and there's a very jolly band. The music is very good.
He'll look after us.'

It was on the tip of Lindsay's tongue to say that
in her experience, most restaurants were not only
restaurants were not only very expensive but also
insultingly rude. For Lindsay, the restaurant was
Lindsay would have said that the restaurant was
some simpering woman. She was not a woman.

started praying as a flunkey in uniform held the doors back.

Please God, the Lindsays said silently, to a deity in which neither quite believed. Please God, let them honour Colin's reservation; please God, don't let them relegate us to a Siberian table so conspicuously ill-placed that even Colin will notice; please God, don't let them treat Colin like a worm, and please let them see that he means well and he's really very sweet . . .

Lindsay was so busy with these prayers and with squinting around trying to work out which table was nearest the rest-room exit, and whether they were being inexorably led to it, that she was seated at a banquettable opposite Colin before the details of their reception began to penetrate.

Then she began to realize: the table at which they had been placed was a delightful one, and someone – she is not sure who it was, but someone pleasant with a deep, French-accented voice – had used the phrase, 'our usual table'. This usual table, moreover, was in a quiet, even an intimate corner; it had a snowy linen cloth, candles, charming flowers; beyond it, a wine waiter, supervised by a smiling benignant grey-haired man, was opening a bottle of champagne. It occurred to her that the benignant man must be Fabian – this *aperçu* being assisted by the fact that Colin addressed him as such.

'With my compliments, Mr Lascelles,' benignant Fabian appeared to be saying. 'The 'seventy-six. I remember you liked that.' A large leather-bound folder is placed in front of her. Opening it, Lindsay saw that though it listed three types of caviar and five ways of roving lobster, the menu she had been given did not list prices.

'*Bon appétit*,' said Fabian, a man Lindsay realized she now liked very much. He withdrew. Colin gave some felic toast, which he said he had once learned in

Scotland, and which ensured long life, love and happiness.

Lindsay took a sip of the champagne; it was nectar; it was a revelation; it was – no contest – the most delicious champagne she had ever drunk in her life. A tiny silence fell; remembering her new womanliness, Lindsay sweetly and sympathetically asked Colin what sort of a day he had had.

‘Ghastly. Unspeakable. Agonizing,’ he replied. ‘Here, feel. My hands are trembling.’

Lindsay took the hand he held out.

‘It’s fine. Not a tremor,’ she said, after a while.

‘Really?’ A glint of amusement appeared in Colin’s innocent blue eyes. ‘I *am* surprised. Try the pulse.’

Lindsay tried the pulse. She frowned, concentrating.

‘It’s fast,’ she pronounced eventually. ‘Definitely feverish.’

‘I thought it might be. Entirely the fault of the evil genius, of course.’

In his easy way, Colin then began to discourse on the subject of the evil genius – or Prospero, as he had apparently now decided to call him. He moved on to shred the character of the famous actor, Nic Hicks. He did this with some wit, but Lindsay was distracted and listened with only half her attention. Various suspicions were inching their way forwards from the back of her mind, and she wanted to examine them in detail. This was not easy; they kept entangling themselves in Colin’s sentences and the choice she was trying to make from the menu. Concentrate, she said to herself.

In the first place, there was, possibly, an alteration in Colin’s demeanour tonight; she could have sworn that there was a flirtatiousness in his manner when he took her hand, and an accomplished flirtatiousness at that. Perhaps, though, this thought was unworthy and had been planted by Pixie. In the second place, there was the question of Colin’s suit. She had never seen him in

a suit before, and this three-piece masterly garment dark grey in colour with the narrowest, most distinctive pinstripes, was of a kind Lindsay had believed extinct. It could only have come from Savile Row; it made her understand what Englishmen mean when they spoke of having a suit *built*. The suit, the chair, the restaurant; Colin's reception there . . . the suspicion swelled and took on a monstrous shape. It occurred to Lindsay that, judging from this evidence, Colin Lauder might be rich.

This idea distressed Lindsay, who was wary of them in general, and wary of rich men in particular. Soon or later, a lordliness and a crass insensitivity, which with her experience almost always accompanied wealth, would come apparent. Sensing Colin's gaze, she bent her head to the menu. Fish or meat; flirtatious or merely friendly; rich or normal?

'I can't decide,' she said.

'Well, the caviar's always reliable,' Colin said in a gentle, helpful way. 'If you like caviar, of course lobster's generally excellent. Great-Aunt Emily said so by the soft-shell crabs . . .'

Lindsay saw, in both senses, her entrée.

'I shall begin with the lobster,' she said. 'Poached. Then the grilled sole, I think . . . The wonderful suit, Colin; is it in honour of Aunt Emily?'

'Most certainly not. It's in your honour. I'm glad you like it; I found it in an Oxfam shop. I'll have the same as you, I think . . .'

He placed these orders with a waiter who had constantly appeared at his elbow. He opened the tome of the wine list, flicked the pages briefly, closed it, and made a tiny movement. The wine-waiter materialized.

'They have some very good Montrachet, Lindsay. Would you like that?'

Lindsay, to whom alcohol was alcohol, and who was when nervous, felt pretty sure that she had drunk

Montrachet on some occasion and liked it very much. She said so.

'I love all Sauvignons,' she added.

'Oh.' Colin looked confused. 'Well, this is a white burgundy, but if you'd rather have . . .'

'No, no, no. I love burgundies too. I love everything in fact.'

Colin smiled. 'We'll stay with the champagne for the moment,' he said. 'Then, the Le Montrachet DRC, think. The nineteen seventy-eight. If you'd bring it with the fish.' The waiter departed.

Colin gave Lindsay what she felt was a curious look.

'Better be prudent, I think,' he remarked, in a meaningful way.

'Yes, yes,' said Lindsay, still weighing the provenance of the marvellous suit. 'Ever since that lunch in Oxford I've reformed. I'll never get drunk again in my life.'

'Nor I,' said Colin, laying some stress on this.

'They seem to know you here, Colin?'

'A bit.' He met her gaze unwaveringly. 'It's because of Aunt Emily. This place is sort of her local.'

Lindsay opened her mouth to say, Local, huh? and shut it again.

'Really?' she said, in an encouraging tone, and, to her surprise, found no more was needed; Colin was off and away at once.

'Well, she lives not far from here, you see. She has an apartment in this amazing building, 1910, Hillyard White was the architect. I wanted you to see it – that's partly why I thought we'd pop in on Emily tonight. It's one of the most extraordinary buildings in Manhattan and it's absolutely untouched – not a single detail despoiled, for once. Only the Dakota is in the same class but even the Dakota can't compete. The staircase . . .'

Lindsay was glad to see the effectiveness of the prompt-feminine, but had no intention of being deflected by architecture.

'But you obviously come here often yourself, Colin?' she said.

'If I'm in New York, I usually drop in – with Emily. She's been coming here for about three hundred years you see; in fact I think she used to come here with her father. And she first brought me here when I was eight so it's become a tradition, and it always cheers her up. She gets lonely – not that she'd ever admit that. Too many of her old friends are dead or housebound, and Emily's still packed with energy, indefatigable, a true daughter of the revolution . . . I hope you'll like her. I do, very much.'

Lindsay was impressed by this speech, for its sincerity was transparent, and she warmed to Colin. Her suspicions backed off a little way, and Lindsay felt glad the counsel for the defence was trouncing the prosecution, she decided, as the lobster arrived; Colin was too sweet-natured to be rich.

'So, is she an aunt on your mother's side or your father's?' Lindsay asked, too occupied by the appearance of the lobster to notice that, at this question, Colin exhibited a faint constraint.

'My mother's. My mother was American.' He paused. 'She – well, she died when I was eight.'

'Oh Colin. I'm so sorry –' Lindsay at once looked up and placed her hand on his arm. To her astonishment, she saw that he was blushing. He blushed slowly and agonizingly, from the neck of his impeccable shirt to his hairline; he blushed like the heroine of a nineteenth-century novel, and Lindsay, appalled that she seemed to have inflicted this, took his hand in hers at once.

'Whatever's wrong, Colin?' she began.

'*Everything*,' Colin burst out. 'Why did I do this? Why didn't I *think*? I should have known – you don't like it here, do you? It's not your kind of place. I could tell when we came in – but I thought it might grow on you. And now, you're trying to be polite, but it's a *disaster*.'

Dragging you off to see my aunt – why did I decide to do that? I must have been mad. Insane. We should be going on to a nightclub, something like that . . .’

‘I hate nightclubs,’ Lindsay said.

‘. . . And this place! I must want my head examined. We should have gone somewhere new, somewhere fashionable; one of those minimalist places, in SoHo, somewhere like that. Hundreds of tables, lemon grass in everything. Californian food . . .’

‘Colin – will you listen to me a minute?’

‘I *know* those places. I could have rung them up. *Why* didn’t I think of that? *Why* did I start talking about architecture? *Architecture!* Christ! I could see you were bored; you cut me off, and what do I start on – my *aunt*. My aunt and the evil genius, it’s a wonder you haven’t gone to sleep . . .’

‘Colin.’ Lindsay pressed his hand, and the tirade bubbled a bit more, then stopped.

‘That’s better. Now listen to me. I hate those SoHo restaurants. I hate those restaurants wherever they are. I loathe lemon grass, I loathe the waiters auditioning when they recite the menu, I loathe the table-hopping and the celebrity-spotting. I like it *here*; I like it very much.’

‘Really?’ Colin looked at her in a doubtful way. ‘You’re not just saying that?’

‘No. I promise you I’m not. It’s wonderful here – a immense treat. This is the best champagne I’ve ever tasted in my life. I’m looking forward to meeting your aunt and I’m quite looking forward to eating this lobster which I’ll do once you’ve calmed down. And while I eat it, you can talk to me about architecture, or your family, or the evil genius, and I shan’t be bored in the least. Now . . .’ She hesitated. ‘I’ll tell you what was worrying me earlier, if you like.’

‘Go on.’

‘To tell you the truth, I was mainly worrying about

the bill, because it's going to be catastrophic, Colin . . .

'Well, yes.' Colin was showing signs of recovery. 'expect it is.'

'Exactly. So you shouldn't have done this. It was very sweet of you, but it wasn't necessary . . .'

'Sweet?' Colin frowned, but the glint of amusement had returned to his eyes.

'All right – kind, thoughtful. But unless you've come into a fortune recently . . .'

'Recently? No, alas.' Colin smiled. 'But Tomas Courtenay is quite generous, you know, Lindsay. It won't hurt to push the boat out a bit, once or twice.'

He answered her with such frankness, with such an engaging smile, that Lindsay felt ashamed of her suspicions. They were low things and they all scurried away at once. Her face cleared and she gave a sigh of relief.

'Well, I'm very glad about the fortune,' she said. 'I hate riches; they get in the way, don't you think? You know, Scott Fitzgerald, "The rich are different from you and me" – all that.'

'Have some more champagne.' Colin paused. 'I agree. A very good quotation, that.'

'But you're being extravagant,' Lindsay continued. 'So I want you to promise we can split the bill, then the bill will only be semi-catastrophic, all right?'

Colin hesitated then. He looked at Lindsay for some time, an odd expression in his eyes. He looked faintly bewildered, Lindsay thought, and faintly stunned, as if some unknown assailant had crept up behind him and struck a blow from the back. Then he began to smile. His eyebrows Katya had described as diabolic rose in two quizzical peaks; the blue eyes lit with a deepening warmth and amusement. Katya had been right, Lindsay realized, and so had Pixie: Colin Lascelles was not only good-looking, he was an attractive man. He did not attract her, obviously, but she was beginning to see how he could be extremely attractive to someone else.

He decided he would play it by ear. In the meantime he thought, it would be wise, given Lindsay's opinion to be more careful. Lindsay noticed *details*, considered details, give-away details such as suits.

When Lindsay was looking away, he seized his opportunity, and, hidden by the tablecloth, removed from his wrist the leather-strapped, wafer-thin gold Philippe watch. He could hardly claim to have found *that* at Oxfam. He stuffed it into his pocket, feeling more confident at once.

'So,' said Lindsay, leaning forward and smiling in the most enchanting and feminine way, 'tell me more about your aunt's apartment building, Colin.'

Colin, who was not intoxicated, instantly felt so.

'Well,' he said, 'it's called the Conrad building, it's a very strange, even sinister place.'

IX

Alone in his loft at TriBeCa, earlier that evening, Tomas Court had also been conducting a dialogue about the Conrad building, a dialogue none the less forceful for being imagined. The two speakers were himself and his wife, and the dialogue began as soon as Thalia, Mario and Colin left.

The minute the door closed on them, it burst out in his mind, a cacophany of contradictions, interruptions and pleas, of ill-phrased assertions and ill-timed *non sequiturs*. Court stood quietly in the shadows of the room, outside the circle of bright light that lit the work table, and let this chaos into his mind. He was used to this form of possession; when he ceased working, a process that demanded all his energy and will-power, he always felt drained and bloodless, emptied and light-headed: an energy vacuum had been created, and into this vacuum anything, including malevolence, might rush.

Today it was to be the Conrad. So be it, he thought, and waited, not allowing his breathing to quicken or tighten. He knew that, given time, this cacophany and havoc would resolve itself. He fixed his eyes on one feature of the room – it never mattered which feature, and in this case it happened to be the bars of the window, opposite which he stood. The bars, eight feet tall, and at least six across, formed a crucifix shape, which amused him distantly, since he was without religious belief. He looked at this cross, and was aware that outside in the street some absurd commotion was taking place: he

could hear that his English location manager was giving vent to his feelings, but as far as Court was concerned he might just as well have been shouting his protests in Urdu. Lascelles's laments were a cry from another country and Court felt an absolute lack of curiosity in anything Lascelles said.

After a while, as Lascelles's voice died away and silence fell in the room, the dialogue with his wife quietened; her interruptions became fewer, then ceased altogether; he was left listening to his own voice. Why? said his voice. Why, why, why? Why live there? Why invite rejection? Why do this?

He felt stronger at once, the moment of mental palsy over and done with, he told himself. The *why* questions were familiar demons; they had been plaguing him for months. It was now safe to move, safe to begin functioning again, although he truly functioned, as he well knew, only when he worked. He picked up one of the cardboard boxes which littered the loft, and carried it across to the circle of light on his black work table.

He took no second look at the welter of coloured papers still strewn across its surface; he had not the least inclination either to re-examine them or tidy them up. Each day, embarking on work, whether here, on location, or in a studio, he would know, before he began, exactly where he aimed, and how much expenditure of spirit, energy and will-power would be necessary that day to take him there. When he reached that pre-ordained point, he stopped, and had been known to do so in mid-sentence, or mid-take. If necessary, he would drive or drag others on with him to this stopping place; if necessary, he would manipulate, annoy, abuse, frighten, trick or charm them *en route*, but get there he would.

He opened the lid of the box and moved the tumble of shooting schedules to one side to make space. During the day, these papers held magic, for they were the raw materials of his art, as essential to it, in their way, as

celluloid, cameras, actors and light. Now, since he was at rest, they were inert, and merely his instruments; they were without power until tomorrow at seven in the morning, when he again picked them up.

From the box he took out the material which various researchers had been gathering for him for months. Every scrap of information here concerned the Conrad building. There were old architectural journals; batches of photographs new and old; photocopies of the original plans for the building, plans which had been lying in some city hall archive for decades. Court laid them all out on the table and began to examine them minutely; it was not the first time he had done this.

He examined the, to him, grotesque façade of the Conrad, with its baroque excesses and its Gothic turrets. It seemed to him that the architect had given the building a forbidding and secretive look. He disliked the extravagance of its great gaping maw of an entrance; he disliked the *oeil-de-boeuf* windows which ornamented those turrets and punctuated the roof-line, and which gave the building a menacing, many-eyed look, as if it were continuously hungry, and continuously vigilant.

His wife was seeking to buy apartment three, situated on the north corner of the building, overlooking Central Park. She had already viewed this apartment several times; she had refused to allow him to accompany her – proving to be obstinate on this point.

‘Tomas,’ she had said, ‘you don’t want me to live there and you don’t believe I’m going to be allowed to live there. No. What’s the point?’

Thwarted in this desire, he had turned to this research material instead. Now, he inspected the architectural plans, drawn up by Hillyard White over eighty years before. He traced the walls of apartment three, examined its orientation, dimensions and fenestration. He could see the disposition of the rooms; the photographs and descriptions in the various books a

journals gave him an idea of how this interior might look. He could half see some rich space with many closets, with rooms which led into further rooms, and with yet more rooms beyond that. The apartment was very large; he now realized for the first time that it was a duplex. Towards the rear, there was a second storey, secreted away; this would be the site of the main bedrooms; this was where his wife would sleep. His wife had her final meeting with the board of the Conrad, with the committee who would decide her fate, the following morning; she would be given their decision then. Suppose that decision, against all the odds, was yes? How did you *reach* that second storey, that bedroom?

He bent more closely to the plans, which, to a non-expert, were not easy to decipher. There was the staircase – he saw it now – but how did you reach the staircase?

He only half saw, half glimpsed, he realized. It was like looking into some marvellous lighted room from the street outside, and then, just when all its secrets were about to be revealed, some officious person came along and closed the shutters in his face.

He was suddenly seized with anger; his hands began to shake. With a furious, violent gesture, he swept the papers to the floor. Immediately, the chaos returned, and those two voices began arguing again in his head. 'Oh, it torments me, Tomas, it torments me,' his wife said. This time, he shouted his wife down and drowned her out, anger giving him an eloquence that, when they actually had this argument, he rarely possessed.

He spelled out to her the insanity of this plan, a misconception from the first. Why was she continuing with the shaming procedures inflicted on her by the Conrad board, who for months now had been vetting her finances and every other aspect of her life? Why had she hired, at huge expense, first a real-estate broker, then one of Manhattan's most expensive law firms to

press her suit? All this money and effort would be wasted, he shouted, raining his reasons down on her now-bowed, imagined head. Neither money nor lawyers turned the key of admission at the Conrad, and if the broker – some man called Jules McKechnie – was claiming otherwise, she was being taken for a ride. Could she not see that?

The Conrad, he reminded her, was a co-operative; its board could choose whom to refuse and whom to admit. For decades, the Conrad board had weaselled its way around the law, in particular the laws regarding discrimination on grounds of colour, race or sex. It was a *bastion*, and it did not raise its drawbridge to actresses divorced women with young children, or the *nouveaux riches*. Did she not know, had her precious broker and her over-priced lawyers not *checked*: no member of the acting profession, let alone a movie star of her fame had ever lived in the Conrad, though many had sought admission. And no young children had been brought up in the Conrad for a quarter of a century at least.

The occupants of the Conrad, he continued, were ageing, rich, white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants. They believed in the Social Register, since they, and everyone they cared to know, were listed in it; they believed in money, provided it was inherited, and thus disinfected of all taint; and they believed in an Episcopalian God while failing to practise any of His teachings. They are *evil*, he thundered; that building is *evil*, and I will not allow my son to be brought up in that place.

'Our son,' his wife's voice quietly corrected him, and he heard again her one attempt to justify her decision. 'I want to live there, Tomas. I see it differently from you. I shall feel safe there. This has nothing to do with you. It's *my* choice.'

That reply, which had infuriated him when she gave it, and which infuriated him now, explained nothing. It was in his wife's nature to explain herself and her actions

as little as possible, and it was this intransigency in her, this refusal ever to allow him to be sure he understood her, which bound him to her – or so he sometimes thought.

In a sudden rage with her and with himself, he slammed out of the apartment, wearing only a jacket and unprepared for the cold of the streets. He had a car available to him, and a discreet, reliable driver whom he could have called upon, but he disliked others knowing his movements as much as he disliked them knowing his thoughts, so he flagged down a cab, knowing he should go back for a coat, but refusing to do so. He had to be careful of cold air, of course, just as he had to be careful of dust, pollen, pollution, smoke and a thousand other hidden substances in the air; this disability he loathed and resented. His anger deepening, he told the cab driver to take him uptown to the Carlyle, where his son would be waiting for him. Then, changing his mind, and knowing he needed something else, he told him to go to the Minskoff theatre, where his wife would be on stage, and that night's performance of *Estella* would now be taking place.

Why? Why? Why? This question pursued him uptown in the cab; it pursued him across the noisy, crowded space of Times Square, where he abandoned the cab, and it pursued him to the theatre, where he paused, looking at the lights that spelled out his wife's name on the theatre front.

Why live there, and why exclude him in this way, when he was sure she still loved him and wished for a reconciliation as much as he did? Why, when she was eager to work with him, did she still refuse to live with him? Did her continuing fear of Joseph King explain this decision – or was there some other, hidden reason? He glanced over his shoulder, having, as he often did, the sensation that he was being watched. No-one

appeared to be watching him, so he turned down the small alleyway leading to the stage door and entered the theatre, feeling as he had done on many occasions that he would find the answers to all his questions here that they lay very close, within reach.

He was known at the stage door, and no-one detained him there, for these visitations of his were frequent. He went first to Natasha's dressing-room, where his way was blocked, first by the strange androgynous creature Natasha insisted on having as her dresser, and then by one of the bodyguards – the favourite bodyguard, the Texan.

Court was a tall man himself, but the Texan was even taller. Court looked coldly at his blond, muscled good looks. He looked like an overgrown child, and was possibly more intelligent than he appeared.

'I don't see that you can offer my wife much protection if she's on stage, and you're here by her dressing-room,' he said.

'I agree. But Ms Lawrence insists.'

'Give my wife a message, would you? Tell her I need to talk to her. I'm going up to the Carlyle now to see my son. I'll wait there until she gets back after the show.'

An expression of doubt passed across the man's face. 'I'm afraid she's going out after the show, sir. She's having dinner with her property broker, Julia McKechnie. I think it was mentioned . . .'

'Ah, so it was. Then tell her I'll call her tomorrow.'

'I surely will.' He paused. Tomas Court felt his blue eyes, eyes which appeared as innocent as a summer sky, rest on his face. 'Is there anything else I can do for you, Mr Court?'

'No, there is not.'

Court turned away. He went into the backstage maze at the Minskoff, along corridors, through fire doors, up flight after flight of stone stairs. He paused on one of the upper landings, a warning constriction beginning to

tighten around his chest. Then he went on, up more stairs, until, right at the top of the building, he came to the place where he had to be next.

He opened a series of doors and stepped into the lighting box, high at the back of the auditorium, above its top-most tier seats. This dark, boxed-in coffin of a room, glass-fronted, sound-proofed, juttied forward over the heads of the audience and gave him an eagle's eye view of the stage. The two technicians there, used to these unannounced visits of his, looked up, nodded, then returned their attention to the winking lights of their computer consoles. One silently passed him a pair of headphones, and Court stood there, holding them, watching the console, watching their hands moving back and forth among the switches and slides and myriad tiny green and red cue lights. He had a confused sense of being piloted, of being in flight; they were taking off, banking, gaining height. He felt that at any minute, all the answers to his questions would be there in his mind, and he would understand his wife.

He took a step towards the glass wall, felt a second's vertiginous fear of falling as he saw the deep, dark declivity of the auditorium open out beneath; then moved again, and saw across the gulf of the audience, infinitely distant, silent and gesticulating, the figure of Estella, the figure of his wife.

He watched her lips move, her mouth open and close, and her throat pulse. He watched her tenderly as, beautiful in her young girl's first-act white dress, she moved centre stage. He savoured her silence, then, with a slow reluctance, he put on the headphones. The music hit him in a wave; soaring up through the currents of the song came the sound of Estella's voice.

They had reached the fourth scene of the first act; he was hearing the duet between that cruel child, Estella, and poor, humiliated, confused, besotted Pip. Court had no liking for musicals, most of which he despised, and

scant admiration for the composer of this one. He had advised Natasha against taking this part, and he had forebodings of failure for her when she did. None of those factors was relevant now.

This particular song, one of the great hits of the show, was not even a song he liked. He could see that technically it was difficult, and that melodically it was intricate – it interwove major and minor keys in a haunting way – but he had always found its bittersweetness not to his taste. Even so, it left him defenceless. To his anger and incomprehension, the power of his wife's song bypassed his mind and sent shock to his heart, just as – no matter how he resisted – it always did.

Again he felt that warning constriction in his chest. He heard himself make some strange wounded sound. He removed the headphones and fumbled his way out of the darkness of the box. He descended the stairs, staircases without seeing them, still hearing the voice of his wife, both on the Tannoy system and in his head. Halfway down the stairs, he took a wrong turn and found himself lost in that labyrinth of backstage passageways. He turned, leaned against a wall, retraced his steps, descended again, and found himself, at last, at the stage door. He ignored the man on duty there, who, on seeing him, rose with an exclamation of concern. Pushing his way through the doors, he fought to control his breathing and fought to control the anxiety which always made these paroxysms worse. Finding himself in the dimly lit alleyway, he blessed its darkness; he moved away from the door, away from prying eyes, and slumped back against a wall, now gasping for breath.

It was a bad asthma attack and the pain was acute. He listened to the sirens of this city, to the incessant growl of automobiles pumping out their poisons, as he fumbled for the inhaler he always carried. He tilted his head back and depressed the plunger once, then again.

sucking hard. At the third attempt the adrenoceptor stimulants at last took effect. soothed his breathing, if not his mind, and that fist had been squeezing his lungs slackened its grip.

He waited, breathing quietly and shallowly. Women entered the stage door; one man came. No-one took the least notice of him and perhaps no-one saw him; Court, who hated others to witness his attacks, was grateful for this.

He watched the man, the unremarkable man, go down the alleyway, turn into the street beyond and disappear. It came to him, in the clear but distant thought that ideas often did after an attack such as this, that the man could be Joseph King, who – as he had informed his wife – could be alive or dead. That man could be King, and so could any other man he encountered tomorrow, any day of the week.

King could be driving his taxi-cab, or taking his wife in a restaurant; King could be the man he sat next to in a screening-room, or met briefly at some movie function. King might have worked for him, or with Natasha in the past – this last suspicion, that King was connected with the movie industry in some way, having deepened recently, for King's knowledge of movies, he had found to see, was as deep and as intimate as his knowledge of Tomas Court's wife.

King was no-one, and could be almost anyone; it was when Court slept badly and had nightmares, as he often did, it was in Court's own mirror that he saw himself manifested. And King, who had administered his poison so well, pouring the substance into his glass drop by drop, was not a man who was easily killed. Court thought of him as immortal and invisible; even if he were dead – and Court never felt he was – he lived on in the minds of those he persecuted. In this case it lay his peculiar evil and his peculiar strength.

Tall, short, dark, fair, old, young? After five years

still could answer none of these questions. He leaned back against the wall, waiting for his heart-rate to slow and his breathing to relax. When it had done so, he moved away from the protection of the wall and began to walk slowly up the alley. He stationed himself at the kerb in the street beyond, averting his eyes from the flash of his wife's name on the theatre front. He watched the flow of traffic, waiting for the one cab with its light lit which would take him out of this cold foul city air and uptown to his son. Cab after cab, all occupied, and he could sense that although the pain was subduing, his disquiet was not.

Natasha had claimed, closing her bedroom door to him some months before their separation and divorce, that it was he himself who gave King power by believing, or half-believing, by dwelling on all the lies King wrote or said. She further claimed that his obsession with King had not only poisoned their marriage and permeated his work, but was slowly but surely eating away at his health. 'That man will be the death of you,' she had once said.

Court did not view his concern with King as an obsession, and if it were, that was excusable – presumably he was allowed to be obsessed with a man who knew his wife's and son's movements so precisely, and constantly issued threats? But he did acknowledge some truth in her remarks: he admitted that, for several years now, it had been King's actions or communications that brought on the worst of his asthma attacks.

The cure, then, ought to be to forget King, to put out of his mind all those whispering suggestions King wrote, or said – a process that should become easier if King had been silenced and was actually dead. Yet Tomas Court was not sure he wanted to be cured; there was a part of him, and a vibrant part, that clung to King, even as he watched him destroy his marriage and endanger his health. He now missed King's communications; sometimes, at night, when he lay on his bed, listening

to replays of King's past calls, he found himself frustrated at the five months of silence. What he wanted was a new message, another revelation, an up-date.

He needed that dark side, he thought, as a cab finally pulled in at the kerb. He needed to listen to something unspeakable. He wondered, in a distanced way, as the cab eased forward into grid-locked traffic, what he ought to explain that to his wife. Not necessarily decided; such ambivalences lay at the very heart of marriage, as he had been reminded when assaulted by the power of his wife's singing, tonight.

'So this is the Conrad,' Colin Lascelles said to Lindsay as he came to a halt beneath a huge encrusted entrance portico. 'Now do you see what I mean? It is powerful, isn't it? don't you think?'

'I certainly do see what you mean. Dear God, Colin . . .' Lindsay looked up at the portico, which towered over them both. The architect of the Conrad, as Colin had just been telling her over dinner, had been a stranger; the twin Conrad brothers, both financiers, who had commissioned him to design the building, had been equally strange, and – if Colin's account was accurate – the building had a strange chequered past. It bore several ghosts, the most fearsome and vengeful of which was said to be Anne Conrad, unmarried sister to the twins, who in 1915, or thereabouts, had leaped to her death from one of the windows of the apartment which she shared with her brothers. Stepping back to examine the Conrad's façade, Lindsay wondered which window was hers.

Anne Conrad's manifestations were infrequent and ill-omened, Colin had said. Further details had not been forthcoming; Lindsay had intended to prompt Colin, but now she saw this building, she changed her mind. It was too suggestible: if Colin described these haunted places, she might imagine herself into an encounter with

dead woman, who had been young, beautiful – and arranged, or so people said, Colin had added, by way of an afterthought.

She must have passed the building dozens of times, Lindsay thought, yet she had never paused to look at it. Now she did, and at night too, she realized just how magnificent and grim it was. This was how she had always imagined the House of Usher might look. She glanced across, over her shoulder, to the great tract of darkness at the heart of Manhattan that was Central Park, then looked back more closely at the Conrad building's huge entrance mouth.

A cluster of liver-coloured Corinthian columns flanked its approach steps, giving it the air of a sombre classical temple. These columns supported a vast dark carved pediment; even Lindsay's untrained eye could see, however, that the proportions here were infelicitous, for the pediment was oversized, so that the pillars seemed oppressed by its weight. They looked squat, and their appearance was not enhanced by the surface treatment of their massive stone plinths. 'Vermiculation', according to Colin, was the correct term for this doubtful form of decoration; to Lindsay's eyes, the plinths looked as if their stone had been eaten away by millions of blind, hungry worms – or maggots, perhaps.

She gave an involuntary shiver. She began to see that Hillyard White's heart had not been in the rigours of classicism in any case. There might be a suggestion of a Greekish temple, but the whole façade was a monstrous and heterogeneous sprouting of embellishments. This detail had been plundered from the French, this from the Venetians, this from the Egyptians, that from the Spanish; a smorgasbord of past centuries and architectural styles had been gobbled up and spewed forth.

'Dear God, what's *that*?' she said, realizing that even the pillars were not unadorned, and that from some

clustering stone vines mounting the wall behind a dark face was peering out.

'A gargoyle of sorts.' Leaning across, Colin patted ugly head with affection. 'I shouldn't look too close. Lindsay – some of the detailing is quite nasty.'

'What's that in his *mouth*? Oh—' Lindsay from one angle the gargoyle was biting the head of a snake; from another angle it was possibly not a snake and the gargoyle was otherwise employed.

'In we go,' Colin said, somewhat hurriedly, taking Lindsay's arm.

He drew her into a foyer (*Citizen Kane*, Lindsay thought) and greeted first a doorman, then a porter. It took Lindsay some while even to see the porter as dwarfed by the altar that served as his desk. He approached a wall of linenfold panelling, and Lindsay realized that although she knew how she had entered this cathedral – the entrance doorway was somewhere at the other end of this nave, several miles back – she saw no other way out of it.

'Full of tricks, this building,' said Colin, delighted. 'I did warn you. *Not* easy to find your way around unless you know it. Even Hillyard White's plan is deceptive – which is one of the reasons why it's secure, of course.'

He glanced around at the porter, then smiled at Lindsay.

'Don't worry,' he said, 'it gets worse, or better, depending on your point of view. Are you of a nervous disposition?'

'Very.'

'Hold my hand.' He nodded at the porter. 'We go by the main stairs, Giancarlo.'

There was a low buzzing sound, and the linenfold door in front of them opened up. They walked through into a narrow hall, the panelling closing behind them with a soft click.

'There is an elevator,' Colin said, 'but I thought

wouldn't mind walking up. Emily's only on the second floor, and I didn't want you to miss this.'

'No, *indeed*,' Lindsay said.

She walked forward a few paces, across a cold paved floor. She looked at the wide blood-red-carpeted oak staircase rising in front of her, which was lit at intervals by statues of blackamoors holding lamps aloft. It rose before her, then twisted back, and was cantilevered, storey by storey, so she found she was looking at the undersides of the stairs as they mounted up and up to a huge domed space which settled over the stairwell like a lid. She was in the gut of the building, she realized, and all the apartments must lead off this vast central digestive tract. The dome was at least ten storeys above her head, each floor was galleried, and an army could have marched up the stairs ten abreast, yet the effect was claustrophobic. The space was hushed, warm and curiously expectant, as if the stairs, blackamoors and shadowy galleries were waiting to see what these two new arrivals might do next.

'What do you think? Monstrous, isn't it?' Colin was looking around him with affection and pride. '*Sublimely* monstrous. I never get over it.'

The fat coils of the radiator next to Lindsay emitted a digestive gurgle, then a faint, satisfied hiss. She shivered again.

'Hitchcock would have killed for that staircase,' she said.

'Wouldn't he just?' Colin sighed. 'Embarrassing those blackamoors. There was a move to get rid of them a few years back. Emily nipped that in the bud *very* quickly . . .'

'She likes them? Colin - she can't possibly like them.'

'I'm afraid she does. She's not exactly politically correct.' He hesitated. 'The thing is, she was right, from a purist point of view; they *are* original. And Emily's

lived in this building all her life. In fact, she was born here. In fact . . .'

Lindsay, who was growing less keen on this visit to Aunt Emily by the second, sensed that Colin, too, might be having second thoughts. His manner, confident a moment before, was now becoming doubtful. She was beginning to recognize the symptoms of Colin's insecurities, she thought.

'I'm just wondering,' she began, 'isn't it a bit *late*, this visit, Colin? We stayed longer in the restaurant than we meant to do, and . . . She's eighty-five years old, after all . . .'

'Oh, *that's* not the problem. Emily's a nightbird; she keeps very strange hours. She nods off during the day, though she denies that, of course, and sometimes it's hard to know when she *is* asleep. She'll be in her chair, I'll tiptoe about, and then suddenly she'll speak and make me jump like hell . . . So this is early evening for Emily. Around midnight, she gets very lively indeed . . .'

Lindsay was now sure she recognized the symptoms of nerves, which included loquaciousness.

'But there *is* a problem,' she said. 'Come on, Colin, what is it?'

'Well, she's a bit deaf . . .'

'And?'

Colin considered. 'She can be a bit *odd*,' he said finally.

Lindsay wondered whether he might mean senile. Dotty? Eccentric? Slightly demented? Ninety-five per cent crazed? Since Colin was given both to overstatement *and* understatement, his remarks could be difficult to interpret. He was now looking both anxious again and downcast. Lindsay took his arm. 'Well, I'm very glad you're with me,' she said. 'With you here, I feel safe.'

Immediately she had said this, it struck her that she truly meant it; Colin's presence, for reasons she could

not exactly define, was reassuring. Her compliment, or perhaps the fact that she took his arm, seemed to allay his anxieties; his confidence returned at once.

'Not very odd,' he amplified, leading her towards the staircase, 'just odd occasionally. A bit of a tease, you might say. You may find it helps if you remember that . . .'

Lindsay braced herself for this teasing great-aunt. The stairs were not really *Psycho* material, she decided – more *Gone With the Wind*, more Tara. Hello, Scarlett and Rhett, she thought, as they began to climb them, dreamily imagining herself as a feisty O'Hara, and Rowland McGuire as an improvement on Clark Gable. Hello, Polanski, and hello *Repulsion*, she thought, as they turned into a long, galleried corridor, where hands thrust from walls holding lamps. Colin rang the doorbell to Emily's apartment and Lindsay waited for Dracula's servant to answer it. Instead, Mrs Danvers opened the door, and led them into a very large and daunting drawing-room with a du Maurier whisk of her skirts.

An old, a very old, very wrinkled, and very imperious woman held out her hand; introductions were made. Lindsay looked at Aunt Emily narrowly; Well, hello Miss Havisham, she thought.

'I want a word with you. You're late,' Angelica said, as Tomas Court entered the quiet living-room of his wife's Carlyle suite. Court moved past her without greeting her or looking at her, but his manner was often curt, even rude, and Angelica was used to this.

'I've been talking to the bodyguard . . .' he said.

'Which bodyguard?'

'The one here.' Court's manner was irritable. 'John. Jack – whatever his name is.'

'Jack.' Angelica gave him a dismissive glance. 'That's why you're over an hour late? You've been talking to

the bodyguard for an *hour*? Jonathan's been waiting up for you . . .'

'I was delayed. I got held up.'

'He won't go to sleep until he's seen you.' She paused. Court had not looked at her once and had now turned his back. She sighed. 'Maria stayed on to sit with him. He's showing her his new animal books. He wanted to show them to you. There's one on big cats . . .'

'Maria?' Court said.

Angelica sighed again. 'You've met her. You met her the other week. The one who comes to give Natasha her massage before the show sometimes. The aromatherapist. Dark hair, glasses. Jonathan likes her; she's a nice girl . . .'

'Well get rid of her. There's enough women in and out of this apartment as it is . . .'

Angelica, used to this complaint, did not reply. She left the room, and in the distance, Court heard the sound of women's voices. The aromatherapist, the voice coach, the two secretaries, the Yoga expert who taught Natasha relaxation techniques, the personal trainer, also female; Natasha's days seemed to him spent amidst a retinue of female helpers and supporters, and he loathed the way in which they treated her with a reverent concern, tending the hive, tending their queen, cosseting and protecting, grooming, feeding and honing. He found it unhealthy; Natasha had always had a tendency to surround herself with priestesses, and since their divorce, the tendency had worsened; he had often told her this.

'Hi. Good evening,' said a woman's voice. Court glanced round to see Angelica and this Maria, who was being helped into her coat. Like most of Natasha's priestesses, she was ugly, Court noted; overweight, cheaply dressed, with greasy hair tied back in an untidy bun, and hideous thick-lensed spectacles. He was making her nervous, he saw, as she glanced at Angelica in

faltering way, and then gave him a shy smile that was not, he supposed, unsweet.

'Your son's still wide awake,' she said. 'We've had a lovely time. He's a really bright little kid. He's waiting to show you his whale book, Mr Court . . .' She glanced again at Angelica. 'I thought - better avoid the fairy stories tonight. You know, if he's still having those nightmares . . . so we just looked at the animal books. He's so cute. Hey, it's late . . . I'd better be off . . .'

Tomas Court gave her a curt nod; he listened to the sounds of female conversation and laughter as Angelica showed her out.

'Nightmares?' he said, when Angelica returned, closing the door behind her. 'What nightmares? Natasha never mentioned that.'

'He wakes up sometimes.' She avoided his gaze. 'It's been going on for a while now . . .'

'How long?'

'Well, it started around the time of the divorce, then it got better for a bit. Now it's started up again . . .'

'He never gets nightmares when he comes out to Montana. He was fine last summer. It's this place. Cooped up here; his mother out night after night . . .'

'She has to work. The run's nearly over anyway. She'll be leaving the show any day now, then . . .'

'Well, it can't be soon enough. I don't know why she did it in the first place.' He gave an irritable sigh. 'I'll have to talk to her about this. If Jonathan has nightmares, I should be informed. Why wasn't I?'

'You didn't ask, I guess.'

Angelica's tone was insolent, but then she never bothered to disguise her dislike of him. It was, indeed, more than dislike; Angelica's hostility to him had always been unwavering and forceful; it was returned in good measure. The best that could be said of their relationship was that they eyed one another with the respect of combatants fighting their own weight.

In their contests, unceasing since his marriage, Tomas Court had had one supreme advantage: he was male, and he was the husband, with all the husband's rights. This advantage, as they were both aware, had diminished since the divorce.

'Are you OK?' Angelica said now, looking him up and down. She always delighted, as Court well knew, in the least evidence of his physical disability. 'You're white. You don't look so good. You had an attack?'

'I'm fine.' He turned away. 'The pollution's bad. The traffic was bad. I'm tired. I've been working since five-thirty this morning. You can make me some coffee. Bring it through to Jonathan's room . . .'

'You want it black?'

'Yes, I do. I'm going to wait for Natasha—'

'I wouldn't do that. She'll be late. She told you, she's having dinner with that fancy broker of hers after the show, then she has an early start in the morning. The trainer comes at seven. She's having breakfast with Jules McKechnie, then . . .'

'Dinner *and* breakfast? Why's that necessary?'

Angelica gave a small gloating smile and a shrug.

'It's the committee meeting at the Conrad tomorrow and they have to get the details right. It's important to Natasha – and she's nervous. She doesn't want anything going wrong, and it's Friday the thirteenth tomorrow – not too auspicious, right?'

Tomas Court profoundly hoped it would *not* be auspicious. He might have liked to say this; he might have liked to question Angelica further; he would certainly have liked to know whether Natasha was dining with Jules McKechnie alone, or with others. Just the mention of McKechnie's name set off those Joseph King whisperings in his head; King, his very own Iago, was always prompt on occasions such as this. Such questions, evidence of weakness, would have delighted Angelica. He looked at her bulk, at the flat hard planes

her face, at her small and malicious black eyes, and exhaustion close to anguish flooded through him. Sometimes, especially after an asthma attack, he no longer had the energy to fight.

'There's something you wanted to say to me?' he asked quietly.

'Sure. I want to know some things. About Joseph. About what happened in Glacier.' She paused. 'I know what you told Natasha . . .'

'I'm sure you do.'

'And I want the truth.' She hesitated, the hostility in her face softening a little. 'I'm here with Jonathan. I'm the one who's right by his side, day and night. I need to know these things.'

'I wouldn't argue with that. I had intended—'

'I won't tell Natasha. But I need to know . . .'

Across the space of the room, their eyes met. Court turned to the door.

'Fine,' he said, 'I'll explain when I've seen Jonathan. Leaving the coffee through here instead, Angelica. I won't be long . . .'

'Don't be. It's way past his bedtime; he should be asleep.'

'I want to show you the bat book now, Daddy,' Jonathan said, 'and this one on whales. They *talk* to each other, bats and whales, they have this special language, you know . . .'

Court looked at his small son with sadness and with pride; he made an effort, fighting fatigue.

'What, the bats talk to the whales? I didn't know that.'

'No.' Jonathan laughed. 'Don't be silly, Daddy. They talk to each other. Bats talk to bats; whales talk to whales. It's *excellent* how they do it. Look—'

Court bent to the books. His son had a touching dactylicism, a longing to educate, and a passion for facts. He looked at the diagrams his son was indicating; these

diagrams explained bat radar to him, and the frequencies of bat squeaks; similar diagrams, accompanied by a barrage of information, explained the communication systems of whales. His son chattered and Court sat quietly, holding his hand from time to time, or stroking his hair, and waiting for this room and his son's presence, to bring him the peace it usually did.

In the recesses of his mind, images stirred; he saw dark leathery shapes flit through a jungle night; he watched lianas coil like pythons, and he saw, rearing up from this terrifying fertility, the hot mouth of some orchid-like flower. 'Oh, it torments me; Tomas, it torments me,' his wife's voice said. The words had been said many years before, when his wife had been six months pregnant with Jonathan, and had discovered that her husband's infidelities were continuing. Court could not now remember the details of that particular infidelity; he rarely could. It might have been with a man, or with a woman, and it would have been brief for Court never had prolonged liaisons, and with the exception of his wife, who came into a completely different category, he never had the same sexual partner twice.

These sexual encounters he could walk away from without rancour or regret; they were a brief sharp need which he could satisfy as quickly and easily as he could hunger or thirst. His wife knew – he had told her often enough – that they in no way impinged on his love for her; that love, the determining force of his life, and the inspiration for much of his work, was unchanging; it would neither alter nor diminish with time. It was one of the many mysteries of his marriage, he thought, turning a page of his son's book, that Natasha both believed in and doubted this love. Perhaps also, like him, she preferred the lightning flash of uncertainties to the long, calm summer of faithful married love. He was

not sure on that question. During the course of his marriage, he had given Natasha periods of fidelity and periods of infidelity: he had come to believe that the periods of infidelity, with all their attendant pain, insecurity and indeed torment, were the ones when their marriage was most alive to her – though he was less certain of that preference since his divorce.

‘Look, Daddy,’ Jonathan said, picking up the whale book again and turning to its photographs. He began to speak of ice floes, of the Arctic, of the unimaginable depths to which, with one flick of their vast tails, these wondrous creatures could dive, and, as he spoke, Court became a little more tranquil; into his mind eddied the memory of his wife as she had been on the day he first met her. She had already been famous; he had been unknown; he had sent her a script, and through the offices of a shared friend, she had agreed to meet him. She had come to the small, humid, cramped office he had been renting in downtown Los Angeles. He had known what was going to happen, and he knew she had also, from the moment she quietly entered the room. Her beauty had astonished him; he had been unprepared for it, even though he had seen her many times on a screen. Her hair was loose on her shoulders, her face was without make-up, and she had been wearing – he could still see its every detail – a simple, cotton, madonna-blue dress.

‘Daddy. *Daddy.*’ Jonathan tugged at his sleeve. ‘You’re not *concentrating*. I’m telling you about the *whales*. They sing to one another – it’s like singing. And they can hear one another through the water, from miles away sometimes . . .’ he smiled. ‘And you’re miles away too, Daddy.’

‘I’m sorry, darling. I just drifted away a bit. I’m tired, I expect. I was thinking about the first time I met Mommy, and how beautiful she was . . . Now.’ He looked at his watch. ‘You should be lying down, young man.’

You should have been asleep hours ago. Down you go. Let me tuck you up.'

He hugged his son tight against him, some emotion he could not define welling up: a rich mixture of love, pain, loss and fear for his son – none of which could be expressed. His son, small for his age, clung to him; he felt so thin, his father thought, and so light and frail. Tears came to his eyes, and he laid his son down in the bed and tucked him in, averting his face.

'Now tell me,' he said, sitting down on the edge of the bed and taking his son's hand in his, 'what's all this about nightmares? Is something worrying you, darling?'

'A bit.' His son lowered his eyes and began to pleat the edge of his duvet. 'It's Thanksgiving soon. Mommy says we'll be living in the Conrad by then . . .'

'It's possible, darling. It's not fixed.'

'Will you be coming for Thanksgiving, Daddy? I hoped you might.'

'If you want me there, darling, I'll be there. I'll arrange it with Mommy. You know you don't need to worry about that.' He paused. 'And just think, very soon after that, we'll all be in England together – for three whole months. I'm looking forward to that.'

'I am too.' His son's face brightened, then clouded again. 'It's just . . .'

'Tell me, darling.'

'I don't really like that Conrad building, Daddy. Mommy says I'll get used to it, but it's spooky. I'll have a big room there, Mommy showed me, with all these closets for my toys, and Mommy knows this artist man, and while we're away in England, she says she'll get him to paint these animals for me, on the walls. Any animals I like . . .'

'Well, that sounds good, darling.' Court looked closely at his son. He had a small, somewhat melancholy face, expressive, with its fears and its joys easily read. He

pressed his son's hand and added, as if it were an afterthought, 'Which artist man is that?'

'He works at the theatre; he painted some of the sets for *Estella*. He made that horrible spooky room Miss Havisham has . . .' He hesitated. 'I hated that Miss Havisham. Nasty spooky old witch.'

'Well, you know there's no reason to be frightened of her,' Court said gently. 'That's just an actress playing her - and Miss Havisham doesn't exist; she's just someone made up, for a story . . .'

'I didn't like the artist man much either . . .' his son continued, in a low voice. 'I met him one day when Mommy was rehearsing. He looked at me in this funny way. He shook hands, and he had this horrible damp hand . . . He looked at Mommy too; he stared. She didn't notice, but I did.'

Court felt a quickening of alarm then, but controlled it. He would find out the man's name, he thought wearily, and get him checked out, just as he always did. But Jonathan's reaction probably meant little: it was not the first time he had expressed feelings of this sort. They were a by-product of the restrictions that encompassed him, of the bodyguards, of the constant unrelenting suspicion of every male who came to this apartment, every male who lingered, or approached on the street. King had imprisoned his son, Court thought, as effectively as he had imprisoned Natasha and himself, and Jonathan's fear of strange men exacerbated by Natasha and Angelica was a legacy he deeply regretted.

'Jonathan, people do stare at Mommy,' he replied now, in as reassuring a manner as he could. 'It's because she's famous and because she's beautiful. It doesn't mean anything. Now I want you to promise me - no worrying about this. I'll have a word with Mommy, if you don't like this man, maybe she won't use him. Besides, remember that these Conrad plans may not

k out; the people at the Conrad may
neone else have the apartment . . .'
t's very big, Daddy.' His son clasped hi
tly. 'There's all these rooms. I thou
might come back and live there too.
ld . . .'

he plea in his eyes and in his voice cut T
rt. He leaned forward to kiss him, and
utes before he felt able to trust his voic
We'll have to see, my darling. These th
're complicated, you know that. Momn
more than I do, and it's not very g
ma. I expect we'll sort it all out in the
le, just remember how much I love you a
v, lie back and I'll read to you for a bit
? This one?'

nathan nodded. The book, one with w
t was not familiar, was *The Secret*
ces Hodgson Burnett. His son found the
ed and the section he wanted. The story
orkshire, he said, which was where the
ing shortly; Court agreed that this was
: in a large house, Jonathan went on; t
orphan girl called Mary, who was plair
got nicer as the book went on; and there
called Colin. Colin was ill, his son
ting to the paragraph where his father w
ing, and this section here was Jonathan's
t could see why that might be so, as s
n reading. Like Jonathan, the boy in this
ted and troubled; the chosen chapter
's reaction when she awoke to the sound
in a strange house at night. The girl wen
n, Court noted, and – he found the tone se
y began on a mutual process of healing.

'She knows and she doesn't know. I guess she thinks he'll come round to it.' She paused. 'And it is secure; it's a real secure building. Famous for it. Keep anybody out, that building would. I guess that's why she chose it.'

Court gave her a pale glance. The taunt under her words was obvious enough, and she made little attempt to disguise it.

'Well, it won't keep *me* out,' he replied quietly, 'not as long as my son's there, and Natasha would do well to remember that.' He turned away. 'Now, do you want these facts, or don't you?'

'Sure I do.' She paused. 'What Natasha told me, I couldn't really understand. Why all these tests and checks? It seems pretty clear to me – I mean, they found the *body* . . .'

She continued speaking for some while, and Court ended, interested to see just how accurately his explanation to his wife had been reported back. As he had expected, few details had been left out – but then Natasha had always confided in Angelica minutely. He had never had any privacy in this marriage, he thought with a flare of anger. Natasha ran to Angelica the way a good Catholic ran to the confessional; he was certain that Angelica knew Natasha's version of every one of his infidelities.

It had always seemed to him that Angelica would find them undisturbing, and just what she would expect from a member of the male sex. Angelica did not *judge*, he sometimes felt, she just watched, and very little either surprised or shocked her. He wondered now, watching her as she spoke without emotion of violent death and the details of that body in Glacier, whether Angelica knew of, and understood, the final paradox: that it was the advent of Joseph King that had cured him of the need for adulteries.

Had Angelica's keen hard mind made that

connection? He thought it probably had. He thought Angelica would have seen the link between a letter or call from King and his own haste, immediately afterwards, to get his wife back upstairs to their bedroom. He felt sometimes that Angelica had been able to see through those walls and locked doors, and that she had known, as precisely as he did, what then provoked the ensuing excitement, desperation and physical abandon.

'He's sick,' Angelica was saying now, gazing off into space, her slab of a face hard with concentration. 'He's sick and obsessed, and the way I figure it is, he went out to Montana because he knew Jonathan was there, then he finally cracked. He went out to Glacier and found a real quiet private place, and he *jumped*. Good riddance. It took him a while to die – I hope it did. I figure . . .

Had Angelica made that connection? Court wondered, looking at her, then moving away as she continued speaking. Sometimes he felt she had not only seen the link, but pointed it out to Natasha. At other times, he felt that his wife had understood that link and had done so alone and unaided. It would not have been difficult; besides, it had seemed to him that Natasha shared his needs initially. He had been able to see certain dark excitement in her eyes, which, on occasion she had disguised with weeping.

'Oh, I can't bear this,' she would say, letting one of King's letters fall from her hands. 'Take me upstairs, Tomas. I want to be with you.'

Being with him was a euphemism. The instant the door had closed and they were alone, he had seen her face light; she might not admit it, but he had known that she responded as strongly as he did to promptings other might have judged perverse or transgressive.

'So he finally went over the edge,' Angelica was now saying, still frowning off into space. 'But what I don't understand is, how come he was always so well informed? How come he knew where you'd been? Where

Natasha had been? I mean, that wasn't guesswork. He must have been following. He must have been *watching* . . .'

Court turned his back to Angelica. He leaned against a table; he could hear his wife's voice very clearly. 'He must have been *watching*, Tomas.' He closed the bedroom door, and, beginning to tremble, turned to face him. 'How else could he have known that? He must have watched you with that boy. In a *park* lot? Tomas, how could you do that? It makes me *angry*. I can't bear – you *let* him? What did he do? Is it different when a man does that to you? Did he do it more than once? How long did it take him? Tell me . . .'

Her husband had told her. Her response, agitated and disguised, was immediate; he had been able to feel the electricity in her hands when, bolder than the boy had been, she began to touch him.

'But what I can't figure out,' Angelica was saying, 'I can't figure out why it *stopped*. I mean, why would he give up so suddenly? Like this has been going on for *years*, and then he ups and kills himself? How come?

Court passed his hands across his face. He stared at a pale wall hung with watercolours. For three of the five years this new charged relationship with his wife had continued; then he had made a very foolish mistake – he had admitted, under close questioning from his wife, that for the last two and a half of those years he had had no other sexual partners; he had neither wanted nor needed them; he had desired only her, and had been faithful. She had wept in his arms with apparent joy; the bedroom door had been closed to him thereafter.

Separation had ensued; divorce had swiftly followed. In the period since the divorce – and it was nearly ten years – he had remained celibate, if not in the strict sense, at least in the sense of having no other sexual partners. He was beginning to see that this too was an error; when it was admitted to his wife, he

in this room, a week ago now, her lovely eyes had darkened with an expression of sympathy and disappointment. He had reacted as he always did: angry yet filled with longing for her, he returned to TriBeCa and lay there alone in the darkness, listening to those tapes, finding some release as he communed with ghosts and took his wife by proxy.

'You still keeping all those King tapes?'

Angelica voiced the direct question suddenly, as if even while speaking she had been able to follow his thoughts with unerring accuracy. 'You still listen to them the way you used to do?'

Colouring, Court kept his back to her.

'No,' he replied, 'the police have most of them. I never listen to them now. I'm over that.'

'He had you hooked.' There was a malicious triumph in her voice; in this weakness of his she also exulted.

'Night after night you used to listen and reread the letters. I told you then, it wasn't healthy.'

'I can remember what you said.'

'It was all lies anyway. Filthy lies.' She spoke with sudden venom. 'All those lies about Natasha. She isn't like that - never has been.'

She paused, as if waiting for confirmation of the statement. When she received none, she gave a sigh.

'Accurate about you, though. Chester and Vera. Where you'd been, who you'd been with ...'

'Accurate in some ways.' He turned and gave her a pale steady look. 'And those tapes told Natasha nothing that I hadn't already told her. You might remember that, Angelica.'

'You're honest with her. I give you that. She would be eyeing him. 'She won't take you back you know.'

'Then I shall have to find a way of taking her back,' he replied evenly. 'Believe me, I will. And then I shall I won't be consulting or informing you, Angelica.'

her neck and suffuse her face. Her expression became set.

'She's free of you now.'

'I wouldn't count on that.'

'She's free of King as well. She can start a new life. He's dead; he has to be *dead*. Not one call, not one letter, in nearly five months. They found that body. They found the ID with it.' Her voice had risen. 'I have to *know*, is it *finished*? Is he dead, or isn't he?'

Court gave her a long, still look. He wondered if she were aware of the duality of her own question; he thought not. She wanted to believe King was dead because, for some primitive reason, some reason buried deep in her mind, she believed that if King were dead, Natasha's marriage would similarly be dead. It was himself, he thought, as well as King that she wanted to eradicate from Natasha's future.

'The indications are that he *is* dead,' he replied, 'as you've been saying, and as I told Natasha.' He paused. 'But I don't believe he is. I believe he's very much alive . . .'

'Biding his time?' Angelica leaned forward.

'Precisely.'

'But they found the body . . .'

'They found *a* body,' Court corrected.

Giving her what Colin Lascelles would have described as one of his Prospero looks, he crossed the room. With a sigh, seating himself opposite her and speaking quietly, he began to tell her the story.

'I didn't tell Natasha this,' he began, 'but I know the place in Glacier where they found the body – and I know it well. I went there, Angelica. I went there last July first, with Jonathan, while he was staying with me in Montana. We went with a bodyguard, because I'd promised Natasha I would do that, and we took a

back-country trail. It takes you through the mountains and on down to Kintia Lake . . .’

‘You camped.’ Angelica nodded. ‘I know, Jonathan loved it there; he told me.’

‘We were away three days. It’s a very beautiful part of Glacier and it’s remote – hardly anyone uses that trail. Even in high season you can walk all day and not see a single person. We had . . .’ He hesitated, looking away and seeing the place in his mind’s eye as he spoke. ‘They were three of the best days of my life. We walked, we fished, we had cook-outs – it took me back to my childhood. We slept out under the stars; we didn’t even need the tents. We had three days and nights of perfect weather and absolute peace, and I was glad of that – for Jonathan.’

‘He’d spent months cooped up here in this city,’ he continued. ‘I wanted to show him that there’s another America; a place where he could breathe pure air, where he didn’t have to worry about telephone calls, or what the mail might bring. A place where he didn’t have to keep looking over his shoulder.’

He paused. ‘At the end of those three days, we went back to the ranch, and then, months later, when the body was found, I discovered we hadn’t been alone in Glacier. We’d been watched and followed – and someone went to considerable lengths to ensure I knew that. Do you know where they found the man’s body, Angelica? What was left of his body?’

‘By some water, in scrub. Right under this great wall of rock – that’s what you told Natasha.’

‘Yes – and that was accurate, up to a point. What I *didn’t* tell her was where that rock wall was located. The trail we took goes over it, Angelica. They found that body by the lake shore, not two hundred yards from one of our overnight camping sites. The body had been smashed up by the fall and left there to rot; and I’m certain that wasn’t accidental. It was a place where I’d

been happy, where Jonathan had been happy – anyone watching him there could have seen how happy he was. So they took that place and they polluted it. They've certainly ensured I'll never go back there.'

'Ah, Jesus.' Angelica made one of her superstitious little signs. 'He'd followed you there, then.'

'I'm afraid there's no doubt about that, as you'll see in a minute. Wait a while. Look at the chronology of October, the rangers patrol the park before the snow comes, and it's closed for the winter. That's when the body was found; by which time, it had been lying there, they think, for around four months, in the heat of the Glacier summer. There are bears in Glacier, Angelica. You can imagine; there'd been decomposition, and animal interference, some bones were missing. The only way they're going to make an identification is through dental chart records. It could take months, longer, before they find a match – if they ever do. At the moment, they're going through the records for missing persons state by state – it's slow, and it may well lead nowhere. Meantime, shortly after the body was found, I was contacted. You know why? Because someone had gone to considerable lengths to suggest an identification for the body. Someone wanted to suggest, to the police, to Natasha, that the body was Joseph King's. Now, you know how careful King is, and how ingenious. How do you think he did that?'

'There was a rucksack,' Angelica said, with some eagerness. 'They found a rucksack near the remains, and in the rucksack . . .'

'In the rucksack, Angelica, or in what was left of the rucksack, was something that wouldn't decay, or disappear away – something that would be preserved, and could communicate a message however long it had to lie there. There was a plastic box. A very ordinary plastic box of the kind you might use to pack sandwiches in. Only this one, of course, had rather more unusual contents.'

There was a silence. Court looked around the room, knowing he would continue, yet reluctant to do so. To speak of Joseph King, he always found, was to empower him. He could almost sense his presence now, and so, he knew, could Angelica. He saw her face tighten, and he knew she was remembering, as he did, various little packages Joseph King had despatched in the past – packages with suggestive and unpleasant contents.

‘Tell me,’ she said. She rested her large, square, ugly hands on her thighs. ‘Tell me. Was there a photograph?’

‘Yes. I’ll come on to the photograph in a moment. First of all, inside the box, there was a hunting knife; the kind you can buy in a thousand stores across America – a thin-bladed knife, the sort you use to debone animals. Then there were some shotgun cartridges, though no gun was ever found. And, just to make sure I knew that I’d been watched in Glacier, there was a T-shirt of Jonathan’s. He’d been wearing it the day we camped there by Kintia Lake; it went missing overnight, and we’d thought no more about it. He’d taken it on and off ten times that day – we’d been swimming, and we assumed it had simply been mislaid; it wasn’t. Someone had been down to our camp-site, while we were sleeping – and he wanted me to know that. He could have killed Jonathan then; that’s how close he was.’

‘That bastard.’ Angelica flushed with anger. ‘That bastard. I want to kill him . . .’

‘Wait, Angelica, that’s not all that was in the box. There was also a wilderness permit – they issue those in Glacier if you’re going to walk the longer, more dangerous trails, or if you’re going to camp out. That permit was in the name of Joseph King: issued for the same three days we were there. The home address was some street in Chicago that doesn’t exist, and never did exist.’ He paused, his voice becoming less steady. ‘And finally, Angelica, there was a photograph. Not one of

the publicity pictures of Natasha that he's used before but a family photograph, of Natasha and Jonathan – photograph *I* took, when Jonathan was still a baby, in the garden of that house we had years ago in California.

'A photograph *you* took?' Angelica stared at him. 'But that's not possible . . .'

'A photograph I took over five years ago now.' Coulter gave a weary gesture. 'Jonathan was about eighteen months old. Natasha and I had just finished work on *The Soloist* – you remember?'

'I remember.' She looked at him in confusion. 'But I don't see – how could he get hold of it? That's got to be *before* we got any letters or calls from King . . .'

'Exactly. The police have checked; I've checked; the agency has checked. I know exactly when I took the photograph; it was two months before the first of the calls and letters from King – so we have to re-date the start of his obsession. Except, for all I know, he's got pictures I took even earlier, and he's just waiting to produce them . . .'

'But how did he *get* it? He stole it somehow?'

'No, easier than that. That photograph was the last on a reel of family pictures I took. Jonathan was walking by then, beginning to talk – Natasha loved that house . . .'

He broke off, then after a pause, continued. 'Anyway, I had it developed at the same laboratory in LA that I always used. They sent back the prints and the negatives, and I still have them – but, of course, for anyone working in that lab, it was easy enough to run off extra prints, and no-one would be any the wiser . . .'

He gave a sigh and rose to his feet. 'So, they've now launched a new set of checks: who worked at that lab then? Where they are now? There were over thirty employees who could have had access to that film. It's over five years ago. Most of them have since left the firm, moved out of state, married, changed their names, dropped out of sight . . . It's going to take *months*, ye

again, to trace them and question them. And it will probably lead nowhere. It will probably be another dead end.' He stopped abruptly. 'You know what he'd done to the picture?'

'Cut it up? Like the others?'

'Yes. He'd cut it up.' He gave an angry gesture. 'Cut it up into these neat squares, each one about a quarter of an inch. It was very precise. Natasha's face was on one little square; Jonathan's was on another. And they both had crosses on them, gouged across their faces. When I saw that . . .'

He turned away, feeling his breathing start to tighten. He could feel King's presence in the room acutely now. He felt the old helpless instinct to open doors, search closets, look for a man who was not there – and stay by his son's bedside in case he came through a locked door or a barred window.

'Don't get upset,' Angelica said, to his surprise. In this respect, of course, they were at one, he thought, turning back to look at her, and seeing on her face an expression not of hostility, but sympathy.

'Don't,' she said again. 'It *could* be him; it could be. I don't see that this proves otherwise. He's crazy. I always said he'd kill himself one day – so maybe he did. He jumped, but he had to leave one final message . . .'

'You could read it that way, and Natasha does.' With a sigh, Court returned to his chair and sat down. 'But you see, I haven't explained about the permit.'

'The permit? I don't see . . .'

'Think, Angelica. They issue those permits for a *reason*. If someone doesn't come back and check in, the rangers raise the alarm and send out a search party. They have to do that: someone could be hurt, or lying injured somewhere . . . But that didn't happen in this case. You want to know why there were no alarms, no search parties when that permit *wasn't* handed back in?

The answers are all there in the record books at the rangers' station. On Independence Day, the day the permit expired, the day Jonathan and I left Glacier man calling himself Joseph King rang the range station. He apologized for not returning the permit, said it had slipped his mind, but he was perfectly safe and had left the park. Now, why do you think he did that, Angelica?

Angelica hesitated. 'So you'd know he was alive? Dead men don't make phone calls?'

'Partly, perhaps. But it's more than that – don't you see? He didn't *want* search parties. He didn't want anybody found too soon. The sooner it was found, the easier it would be to identify, so it suited him just fine that he lay there for over four months. That's what I think anyway.'

'But if he placed that call . . .' Angelica frowned. 'That must mean he's alive after all . . .'

'No, it doesn't. It means someone *calling* him. Joseph King placed the call. It might have been King himself; it could have been some friend. *That's* what Angelica.' Court rose again, with an impatient gesture. 'He *wanted* there to be doubts and uncertainties, don't you see? How many ways can you script this? I can think of at least five ways, straight off, and they're all equally plausible.'

There was a silence. Watching her, he saw the realization slowly dawn. She rose to her feet and looked at him uncertainly.

'Then if it isn't his body, whose is it?'

'I don't know; no-one knows. It could be his – it could equally well be someone else's. Some walker; some hitchhiker he picked up; some vagrant, even.'

'But that would mean he *had* killed someone – not just talked about it, not just threatened, but actually done it. Oh, Jesus, I see now . . .'

'It's possible, Angelica. I think that. For what it

worth, the police also think that way, and so does the agency.'

'That bastard. That son of a bitch bastard.' The blood rushed into Angelica's face. 'So we just have to go on waiting - that's his idea? Waiting, the way we always did? That's what we have to live with? Jumping every time the phone rings, having traps on the line, checking the mail, checking the locks . . .' She drew in her breath, pressing her hand against her chest. 'That's what we have to do - go on living with the bodyguards, looking over our shoulders every minute of every live-long day, waiting for that bastard to *resurrect*?'

'It would amuse him to play Lazarus.' Court turned away to disguise his unease. 'So, yes, I'm afraid that's exactly what we have to do. We go on being careful; we go on being vigilant - for as long as it takes.'

He moved away, feeling suddenly exhausted. He looked around this pale dull room where his wife had chosen to live for the past year; his longing for her presence intensified. He began to wish that he had never had this conversation, necessary though it was. He began to wish that he was alone, and that of all the words Angelica could have used, she had not used the word 'resurrect'. That word made him deeply uneasy.

Angelica made a strange and ugly sound - a harsh, rasping intake of breath. Turning to look at her, he saw that she was trembling; the force of her animosity came off her like heat.

'I'm going to fix him, and this time I'm going to fix him *good*. There's something I have to do - it won't take long. I'll be back . . .'

She hastened from the room. Court looked at his watch. It was past eleven. Should he leave now, or stay? His wife would have only just left the theatre. She would be on her way to have dinner with Jules McKechnie, possibly alone, possibly with others; it might be hours before she came back.

He began to move about the room in an ir- way, trying to find in it some trace of the he knew and loved. Its neutrality and its taste appalled him. The room was white on cream – a thousand permutations of colourlessness. had hung some of her own paintings, he saw – wife's taste in paintings was not his.

Since the divorce, she had begun to collect eighteenth and nineteenth-century watercolours; the vaguer and washier they were, the more she liked them. She stared at what might have been a seascape – a wash of indigo, a wash of yellow-white, some inky hieroglyphs that might have been trees, or birds, or ships.

On the opposite wall, she had hung some of her father, the artist mother's oils – paintings he had always regarded as giving the house room. Natasha's mother, now dead, had been a flower-child of the Sixties, and like many children of that particular decade, never grew up. Her amateur paintings, large and violently coloured, were all variations on themes of monstrous flowers, close up. Their stamens and sepals and pistils had a moistly sexual insinuation. Natasha said they were powerful and reminding her of the work of Georgia O'Keeffe. To Couderc, he loathed O'Keeffe's work too, but could see its strength. This proved how curiously blind his wife could be. He could see so much sometimes, yet she could not see, or affect to be, myopic. 'I will get her back, I will take her back,' he said to the throaty flower-child of himself, and he began to see ways in which his marriage might be done, if he was careful, if he scripted it correctly.

It was unbearable to remain in this room any longer. He found; its quiescence and opacity oppressed him. He could still hear his own voice, explaining uncertainty to Angelica, and the air here was filled with unceasing ambivalence and doubt. Also, he could now smell the burning, a peculiarly unpleasant burning smell to

er singed. He could hear, faintly, the sound of rustling and crackling.

He could not bear the jealous hours of waiting, he decided. He would prefer not to know how late it was when his wife returned; he would prefer not to stay here and speculate as to her activities. He went out into the corridor and paused by the entrance to the small sitting room which was Angelica's. Here, the smell of burning was stronger; he could glimpse, through the open door, the cluster of crucifixes and saints' pictures and religious knickknackery with which Angelica adorned every space in which she lived.

'I cursed him,' she said, appearing in the doorway from nowhere, and startling Court. 'I cursed him – and this time I cursed him real good. I got through. I could feel it; I could feel *him*, like some fish wriggling on a hook . . .'

'Yes, well you've cursed him plenty of times before,' Court said coldly, 'and without conspicuous success.'

He looked at Angelica's flushed face; a vein stood out on her temple; her heavy body was giving off heat like an electric plate. He tried, as he had often done before, to tell himself that Angelica was an ugly, overweight, vindictive virgin of fifty-five, whose sole redeeming feature was her love for his son. She was *without powers*, he told himself, and he was the last person in the world to be impressed by the mumbo-jumbo of her semi-Catholic, semi-pagan prayers, curses and jinxes.

He told himself this, but as before, it did not convince. She muttered a few more words, lapsing as she always did, from English to her native Sicilian, to a dialect filled with liquid threat, with razor-sharp sibilants, with saints' names and obscenities intermixed.

She was trembling; the light in the hallway was poor. Court, acknowledging his fear, backed away from her.

'I *fixed* him,' she said, turning her bright black eyes on Court. 'He's starting to die right now – but slow, from

the inside out. I'm going to let him suffer awhile, and then I'm going to finish him off. I fixed him. I had him on-line. He tried to hide, but he couldn't hide from me this time. I summoned him up.'

The last phrase had a hissing sound to it. Conrad turned, and without speaking further, quickly left. He felt followed the instant the door closed, and he blamed Angelica and her dramatics for this. The sensation remained with him when he left the Carlyle; he could not shake it off. He decided to walk to the Conrad building, as he sometimes did at night, and it pursued him there. He stood outside the Conrad, on the north corner, looking up at the dark windows of the apartment his wife wanted – and he knew he was watched.

He swung around, staring towards the shadows and shrubbery of the park; nothing moved; no-one spoke. He looked up at a thin and sickly moon, riding high above that many-eyed roof-line, and then, some time after midnight, hailed a cab and directed it back south.

The sensation of being pursued remained. He could blame it on fatigue, on lack of food, on superstition, on the conversation with Angelica which still rippled through his mind – but he could still sense some watcher, some follower in his street; he could sense eyes as he stepped into the elevator.

Instinct, recognition, the influence of some sixth sense – whatever the explanation for that sensation of uneasiness, he saw how timely its warnings had been as soon as the elevator doors opened.

He felt his body come alive with adrenalin shock; the door to his loft stood open, its locks smashed. He could see that in the room beyond vandalism had been at work. The lights were on; the floor was a sea of paper, and the perpetrator of this, whose identity he did not doubt for one second, was still present. He could hear that low, pedantic, murmuring, Midwestern voice, and

it was murmuring an old message. 'Under the left breast,' he heard. 'Under the left breast.'

He hesitated, flexing his hands, summoning his strength; then, with the eagerness of one greeting an old friend, a familiar not seen in a long while, he moved forward and pushed the door back.

X

'*Breeding*,' Colin's great-Aunt Emily said, with an air of getting straight to the point. She leaned forward and tapped Lindsay on the knee. Lindsay, who had been day-dreaming, jumped.

'She's bred once – will she breed *again*?' Emily asked, in a sharply interrogative manner, glancing towards Colin. For one confusing moment, Lindsay thought this particular question might refer to her.

'*Fecundity*,' Emily continued, turning back to Lindsay, and giving her a glare. 'She is unquestionably *fertile*. In my opinion, *that* is what's giving them the heebie-jeebies – bunch of old women. But, darn it, do they have a point? I want to know what you think, Lindsay. Advise me, my dear.'

Lindsay did not know what she thought. To give advice was a little difficult, as she did not have the least idea what Emily was talking about. She tried hard to think of some noncommittal reply. For at least the last ten minutes, she realized, Aunt Emily had been rattling away to Colin, and Lindsay had allowed her own attention to wander away.

She had been looking at this room, which was large and packed with a glorious accumulation of *stuff*. Some of this stuff was superb and some was tat. She had been wondering why Emily chose to put a vase of green ostrich feathers on a Hepplewhite desk; whether the magnificent portrait above the fireplace was a Sargent; whether the two strikingly beautiful women depicted in it could be related to Emily, who was strikingly plain;

and whether the grand piano in the corner was supporting fifty-five ancestral photographs in silver frames, or fifty-six.

She had also been wondering why Emily had reminded her of Miss Havisham, since she could now see that, beyond a tendency to pursue a private agenda in conversation, Emily did not resemble her in the least. This was no mad Dickensian bride, but a tall, lean woman, with a shock of white hair, bright, iris-blue eyes, and a good line in tweeds. She was wearing three pairs of spectacles on leather thongs about her neck, yet so far had used none of them; she was seated at one end of a gigantic sofa – Colin, looking nervous, was seated at the other end – and somewhere among the plenitude of its exquisite tapestry cushions there was at least one, possibly two, pug dogs. The lighting was subdued, which made the number of pugs difficult to confirm; they, or it, snuffled and snored constantly. Lindsay and Colin were drinking prudent mineral water; Aunt Emily was knocking back a serious bourbon on the rocks.

Inattention, as Rowland McGuire had often remarked, was Lindsay's besetting sin. She was always too busy examining the leaves of each tree in the forest to notice where the forest road led. With a woman like Emily, whose conversation was given to abrupt swerves, this tendency was disastrous. Emily was still waiting for a reply to her question, and Lindsay's brain was in mid-skid. Breeding? Fertility? Lindsay eyed the pug, or pugs; it came to her that Emily was discussing the breeding of dogs, or, more specifically, bitches.

'Pedigree very dubious *indeed*,' Emily now said, rattling off again, to Lindsay's relief. 'Who *sired* her? No answer to *that* question, my dear. And then there's the matter of her *fame*. She is excessively *famous*.' Emily cocked a sharp eye at Lindsay. 'What's our reaction to that, my dear? Is famous bad or good?'

Dogs could be famous, Lindsay thought – if they won

Crufts, or something like that. Yes, she was almost she was on track. Emily was on the subject of breeding, of pedigree, about which Lindsay, who I only strays and mongrels, knew nothing and cared Still, old ladies had to be humoured. She gave E what she hoped was a smile of bright intelligence.

'Tricky,' she said.

'And then there's the *money* question.' Emily's became grave, as did Lindsay's two seconds later. 'much money, my dear – and very *recently* acquired or *earned*, which makes it rather worse.' She pained eyeing Lindsay. '*Loot*. The acquisition of loot. Always a delicate subject, that. Better not investigated so times. As I said to Henry Foxe, Henry, where do you think *this* came from, darn it?'

She thrust out a skinny hand and waggled a fin. On this arthritic digit was a very large diamond, Lindsay saw; it was one of the biggest rocks she had ever seen in her life.

'And d'you know what Henry said? *Tiffany's*.' Emily gave a delighted snort of laughter. 'I always admire Henry's sense of humour; very droll. In fact, Lindsay my dear, there was a time – Lord, back in 1932 it would have been, when Henry Foxe and I . . .'

'More bourbon, Em?' Colin rose quickly to his feet.

'You are one sweet man,' said Emily. 'Don't you agree, my dear? Colin, just wave the bottle over the top.'

Colin poured an inch of bourbon into the glass. Emily declined ice and suggested he wave the bottle a little more. Colin added another inch of bourbon, opened his mouth to speak, shut it again, and sat down with a defeated look. Lindsay eyed Emily; she gave no sign of being in the least intoxicated. *Mad*, Lindsay decided. Totally mad; barking; off the wall, and permanently so to lunch.

There was method to this madness, she suspected, however. Emily had some objective in view, she felt.

even if, for reasons of her own, she was approaching it by a peculiar and indirect route.

'So, to summarize,' Emily continued, 'she's bred once - which reminds me, my dear, You have a son, I think Colin said?'

'Yes, Tom. He's reading Modern History at Oxford now.'

'Ah, Oxford. Excellent. Delectable. I can't believe it, my dear - you look so young.'

'I married young,' Lindsay said, with some firmness.

'And divorced young, too, I hear. Quite right. If they're no good, ship them out . . . Of course, I never risked marriage myself, not that I regret it now . . . So, let me see, your son must be eighteen, nineteen?'

Lindsay sighed. She debated whether . . .

to hurt Colin, whose demeanour now indicated profound and desperate dejection. He shot Emily a pleading look.

'You're rambling about a bit, Em,' he said. 'I expect you feel tired. Maybe we should—'

'Nonsense, I'm just waking up. Hitting form. Besides I haven't finished, and I want Lindsay's views on this. Where was I? Ah yes, I was summarizing – the case of the prosecution, point by damning point! Breeding, pedigree, money . . . and *fans*, of course. The fans very almost certainly present problems, my dear, don't you think?'

Fans? Lindsay, now hopelessly lost, looked up at the ceiling.

And finally, my dear . . .' Emily had been ticking these points on her fingers. 'Finally, we come to the single most important question of all. S-E-X, my dear. And also *love*, of course.'

Love? Lindsay began to see that dogs could possibly be the subject of discussion here. Colin, who had blushed painfully when the words 'sex' and 'love' were used, was now staring hard at the air, in the manner of a man who believed that, if he concentrated hard enough, he could teleport himself elsewhere.

'I'm afraid I don't quite follow,' Lindsay began.

'My, dear, there is the *ex-husband*!' Emily said, as this made everything clear. 'A most *peculiar* man – our spies report. Like you, my dear, if you'll forgive me for saying so, she has *not* loved wisely, and she has not chosen well. Will she choose more wisely second time around? Can we trust her to find a suitable man for someone who will fit in? Alas, not necessarily. She will imagine she is in love, as women do, and her judgement will be impaired . . .'

'What absolute rubbish, Em,' Colin interrupted, five seconds before Lindsay. Showing signs of recovery, he gave his aunt a combative look. 'You're in no position

to judge her first marriage, and she's far likelier to make the right choice second time around . . .'

'I agree,' said Lindsay. 'Having one's fingers burned improves the judgement no end.'

'Do you think so? What a charming pair of optimists you are.' Emily gave them a sprightly look. 'I remain dubious. The next husband – do we know the nature of the beast? No. What about lovers? There are likely to be lovers. More problems there. I foresee disturbances! I can sense them in the air . . .'

She gave a quick glance over her shoulder, then peered around the room as if disturbances might lurk here, among the crowded furniture, behind the thick folds of the curtains – or beyond the room perhaps, Lindsay thought; beyond it, in those shadowy galleries, in that womb of a staircase hall. A clock ticked softly; Emily appeared to be listening; from the plenitude of cushions came a low pugnacious growl. Lindsay, suddenly remembering the ghost of Anne Conrad, felt something cold slither along her spine.

'Did you hear something, Colin?' Emily, paling a little, cocked her head on one side.

'No, nothing. It was probably just Frobisher in the corridor.'

Colin rose, moved to the door, opened it and looked out. A cold draught issued into the room and wrapped itself around Lindsay's ankles. She shivered. Colin closed the door.

'Nothing,' he said. 'Frobisher's in her bedroom watching television – I can just hear it. You probably caught the sound of that, Em.'

'Maybe. My hearing is acute at times.' She hesitated. 'This building is full of noises, and not always sweet ones. Occasionally, it expresses its opinions and its desires. It used to frighten me when I was a child . . . Did you hear anything, Lindsay?'

'No, not exactly. But something – when your little dog

growled. And my hands – my hands feel terribly cold.
'You didn't see anything, I hope?' The question was sharp.

'No, no. Nothing at all.'

'Stop this, Em.' Colin moved across to Lindsay and took her hand. 'Stop it. You're making Lindsay's blood run cold.'

'I am? I did nothing at all.'

'Lindsay, this is my fault. I shouldn't have told you those ghost stories at dinner . . .'

'Perhaps. I'm susceptible to stories. I'm fine now – it passed, whatever it was. Where were we?'

Colin released her hand. Lindsay could sense his unease. As he crossed back to the sofa, a long silent look was exchanged between aunt and nephew; as a result of that look, and for the first time that evening Emily was quelled. She retreated back into her nest of cushions and Colin, to Lindsay's great relief, took charge.

'I doubt if you've followed half of this,' he said. 'Emily can have a rather circuitous approach. Listening to you Em, is like driving blindfold down a chicanery. In fact, it's straightforward, Lindsay. The Conrad building is a co-operative – there's really no equivalent in England. Its board decides whether or not someone can acquire an apartment here. At the moment, one of the apartments, number three, which is directly underneath this one, is available. It used to belong to one of Emily's oldest friends, and she died earlier this year. The woman who now wants to buy it – and we won't name her, I think, but she's an actress and she's very well-known – has been pressing for a decision, because she wants to move in as soon as possible; in fact, she wants to celebrate Thanksgiving here.'

'We've been given a deadline,' Emily piped up. 'We are not used to ultimatums. We don't like them at all.'

'I'd have given you an ultimatum, Em,' Colin said.

with impatience. 'This has been dragging on for months. Bankers, stockbrokers, the IRS, references – it wouldn't surprise me if you had her medical records. It's absurd.' He turned back to Lindsay. 'Tomorrow, the decision has to be made, one way or the other. Emily is on the committee . . .'

'Along with four dithering males!' Emily cried.

'And the Henry Foxe she mentioned chairs it. But don't listen to Emily when she says "dithering"; two of those men are carved in granite, and as for Biff Holyoake – well, can you describe him as a man?'

'I adore Biff!' Emily protested. 'Biff is a sweetheart. Biff is Peter Pan on his fourth divorce . . .'

'Precisely. Say no more.'

'Biff's very pro her anyway. When the subject of orgies came up, Biff was charmed. He said, in that case she'd certainly get *his* vote. Dear Biff! Two martinis for breakfast these days, I hear, but dry in most other ways . . .'

'Orgies?' Colin and Lindsay said in unison. Colin sighed. 'I don't need to ask who raised that possibility, do I? It was you, wasn't it, Em?'

'I might have mentioned it, in passing.' Emily, showing signs of resurgence, gave a gleeful smile. 'One has to consider the worst. Remember her profession! I foresee parties, alcohol, substance abuse . . . people coming and going day and night . . . I know what goes on, you see! Frobisher fetches me the gutter press, and I pay it the very *closest* attention. I fear the worst! What about *cocaine*? Angel dust. Snow. Nose candy – I know all the terms! I think nose candy is on the cards, myself.'

'Em, please.' Colin sighed. 'In the first place, she doesn't live like that – as I've told you a thousand times. In the second, what about Biff? Biff Holyoake, to everyone's certain knowledge, has a four-hundred-dollar-a-day coke habit, and he's had it since 1952 . . .'

'Biff's mother was at Chapin with me. Biff's

grandfather was your great-grandfather's best friend. They founded . . . ' She stopped short, glancing from Colin, who was frowning, to Lindsay, who was amused.

'They founded a firm *friendship*,' she continued, in a manner somewhat flustered. 'A loyal friendship. They were lifelong friends, like you and poor dear Rowla McGuire. So, so – where was I? Ah yes, Biff. Biff must be a lost soul, but he is one of *us*. He is a fine good man and I will not have a word said against him . . . '

'Christ,' said Colin indistinctly.

'What was that, Colin?'

'Nothing.'

Colin, who had sunk his head in his hands at some point during the peroration on Biff Holyoake's ancestry, now raised it. He gave Lindsay a look of blank misapprehension.

'You see?' he said. 'You see what I'm up against here?'

Lindsay considered. She indeed saw what Colin was up against in an obvious sense, since Emily's views were a swamp of prejudice, and arguing with her was like mud-wrestling. But she suspected Colin's words had a deeper meaning. She was still trying to work out what that might be, when Emily stirred, preened, emerged from her nest of cushions, and fixed her with a very intent look indeed.

'So, my dear,' she said, 'now you know *everything* and I want your considered opinion: Should we admit her to the Conrad, yes or no? I feel you can help me here. I'm not young any more – but you, you also have a child, you're also divorced. You're a modern young woman, and Colin thinks you have *excellent* judgement . . . '

'He does? Thank you, Colin.'

'Of course. He admires it no end. It was Lindsay's judgement you were admiring, wasn't it, Colin? Just the other day?'

'Yes,' said Colin, somewhat fixedly.

So there you are then. You must tell me how to vote tomorrow, Lindsay. I rely on you entirely, my dear.' Well, I think it's very simple,' Lindsay began. 'It seems to me that you're proposing to blackball a woman for the most appalling reasons. How can you reject someone for being a woman? Or divorced? Or having earned a lot of money? For having a child?'

'Orgies, rumours, fans,' said Emily. 'Don't forget those.'

'Have your sources – I think you called them your spies – produced any evidence of anything remotely resembling orgies?'

Well, no,' Emily replied, with deep regret. 'There remains a lack of evidence, although the enquiries have been no stone unturned.'

I know those stones,' Lindsay said, with some severity, 'and I know what comes out from under them when you lift them up. Surely . . .'

'I remain suspicious of the *fans* myself.' Emily bridled. 'And of journalists who, in my experience, are unprincipled people capable of insinuating themselves anywhere. Even here.'

'I am a journalist.'

'So you are, my dear, but of a very different kind. I was referring to seedy little men in mackintoshes. Candalmongers. I'm sure you know the breed.'

There was a silence. Lindsay began to see that Emily was very far from mad – and she played a mean game of conversational tennis. The harder Lindsay hit the balls, the harder they were returned. Emily also had a rich variety of stroke play. Lindsay's volley on 'stones', low and well angled, she had thought, had been sliced back with a lot of topspin. She was losing all sympathy with Colin's Aunt Emily, Lindsay decided; amusement at her antics was ebbing fast.

In particular, she disliked the way in which Emily

insistently coupled her with this unknown woman seeking admission to the Conrad. Where were the similarities between them, beyond the fact that they both had children and were both divorced? Why all that stress on fertility, on breeding? The sensation was growing on her that, for some incomprehensible reason, it was she herself who was now on trial.

'Have you met her?' she asked now. 'You must have met her, presumably? Did you like her?'

'I have met her once. I thought her a consummate actress. As to whether I liked her, I couldn't say.'

'But you found nothing to dislike? Or distrust?'

'Not on that occasion, no.'

'Then you must admit her,' Lindsay said. 'You must see, you can't let prejudice and rumours influence you here.'

'Interesting,' said Emily.

'I *knew* you'd say that.' Colin revived. He gave Lindsay a warm smile. 'There you are, Em. Maybe you'll listen to Lindsay, since you won't listen to me.'

Lindsay at once felt encouraged; she warmed to her name. 'The only thing is,' she continued, 'it's no good wasting your vote. So, if the other four are opposed to her, you'd have to find a way of bringing them round to your view. You only need two additional votes . . . I wonder, are the granite men against?'

'So I believe.'

'Then could you influence Biff, perhaps? I'm sure you could, by the sound of him . . .'

'Of course she could!' Colin rose, with an air of excitement. 'Biff always listens to Emily; he does whatever she tells him to do. She can twist him around her little finger. He's putty in her hands . . .'

'Colin, you are mixing your metaphors,' Emily said. 'Calm down.'

Lindsay gave Emily an appraising look. She could see it would be more productive to appeal to Emily's

power-lust – well-developed, she felt – than to her sense of fair play.

'I don't suppose you could influence Henry Foxe,' she began, in a doubting tone. 'No, almost certainly not. That's a shame . . .'

Emily drew herself up, resentful of this slight to her powers. 'Not impossible,' she said, eyeing Lindsay in a thoughtful manner. 'A woman of ingenuity might find a way . . .'

'Really?' Lindsay gave her an innocent look. 'He's not decisively against then?'

'My dear,' Emily drawled, 'Henry Foxe is on the fence – which is where he's been for most of his life. One of the problems in 1932, and if you'll forgive my being frank, not the only one, my dear . . .'

Emily gave a slow, ribald, reptilian wink. Lindsay, startled, decided to take this as a sign of encouragement.

'Well, I'm sure you could get him off the fence,' she said. 'I'm sure you could persuade him . . .'

'Possibly.' To Lindsay's delight, she saw that the light of battle had begun to dawn in Emily's eyes. 'Henry Foxe is the kind of man who likes having his mind made up for him . . . You know the type, my dear?'

'Yes, unfortunately, and I can't bear them. I hate men who dither around . . .'

'For the first thirty years of Henry's life,' Emily continued, still eyeing Lindsay in a thoughtful way, 'Henry's mother made up his mind for him, then his wife took over, for the next four decades. His wife, a tedious woman, *not* one of my dearest friends, is now *dead* . . . However, like many men – and I'm sure you'll be equally familiar with this phenomenon, my dear – Henry Foxe requires the illusion that he has made up his own mind without assistance, especially from a mere female. So any persuasion has to be undertaken with *stealth* . . .'

'Difficult.' Lindsay frowned. 'I do know the type –

only too well. I work with at least ten of them. I wonder does he have any sense of gallantry? A spark of chivalry? That could help . . .'

'Yes, yes, yes,' cried Colin, animated again. 'That's brilliant, Lindsay. The white knight rides to the rescue of the beleaguered woman . . .'

'Chivalry, my eye,' said Emily, somewhat grumpily. 'Henry Foxe's instincts are not yours, Colin. He is not chivalric; he is *cautious* – as I discovered in 1932.'

'Reasoned argument?' Lindsay ventured.

'You jest, my dear.'

'Then I give up.' Lindsay gave a sigh and a smile. 'There's only one thing for it, you'll have to use your womanly wiles.'

This remark, not intended with any great seriousness, produced in Emily a sudden and dramatic change. Her expression became cold.

'Really? Isn't that somewhat underhand? I have never approved of such manipulations myself – one of the feminine characteristics I *least* admire . . .'

'Em.' Colin rose, his expression suddenly anxious. 'Don't be absurd. Lindsay didn't mean . . .'

'Besides . . .' Emily, ignoring him, pressed on. 'Besides – do I want to change Henry's views? I'm not at all sure that I do. Henry will almost certainly come down against me, in the end, and I feel he is right.'

She gave a small fretful gesture and rearranged her pug. Her feathers were ruffled, Lindsay realized, and there was now disapproval in those cold, blue, raptor eyes.

'Forgive me, my dear,' she continued, 'but I feel you are being more than a little hasty here. You seem to assume I agree with you. I don't recall saying that. This is a serious issue, after all. I have lived in the Conrad building all my life. I plan on *dying* in this building . . .'

'But I thought – you asked for my view . . .'

'My dear, you have been trying to railroad me – you, and this nephew of mine here.'

'Persuade, Em, not railroad. Look, it is getting very late, and I really think . . .'

'Am I not to be allowed my say?'

'Of course you are, Em, but . . .'

'*Festina lente*,' Emily pronounced, magnificently, turning that blue-ice gaze back upon Lindsay. 'That is an always has been the motto of this building. Do you know what it means? Colin will translate, since he had classical education . . .'

'It means "Hasten slowly",' Colin said, his tone now openly mutinous, 'and everyone knows that. Emily, it's time for us to go . . .'

'Hasten slowly. Precisely.' Emily, still ignoring him, swept on. 'A very wise dictum, as you will appreciate Lindsay, should you ever reach my age. Change should always be gradual – especially so in a place such as this. The Conrad is an institution, one of the last of its kind in Manhattan. It has its traditions and its standards. You can buy or manoeuvre your way into most places these days, but neither money nor manipulation will gain you admittance *here*. We do not lower the drawbridge without the most careful consideration, and we are not taken in by sweet talk and feminine wiles . . .'

She fixed her eyes on Lindsay even more intently when she made this final remark, and Lindsay found she was becoming angry.

'Consider,' Emily continued, gesturing at the room crammed with all its costly spoils. 'This is a safe building. There may be crime on the streets of this city, but it never infiltrates here. People lead quiet lives in this building; they honour its traditions, because that is as it has always been our way. It is staffed by a loyal group of people, retainers, one could say, most of whom, like the residents, have been here many, many years. They know their place. They are well remunerated, and w

cared for, and they love this building as much as I do . . . That is why, as my nephew will no doubt have pointed out to you, it is run with supreme efficiency and remains so well-preserved . . .

'I endorsed this building from an architectural point of view, Em,' Colin interjected, his manner now also cold. 'I didn't endorse these views of yours – and you know that perfectly well.'

'I haven't finished, Colin. Please have the goodness not to interrupt. Wait your turn.' Emily fixed her gaze upon Lindsay again. 'I want your friend to understand the issues here. You see, my dear, we are like a little state here . . . or you could say, perhaps, that we are like a *family*. We have to be very careful not to admit the wrong element. By admitting into our circle the wrong type of person, we could sow the seeds of our own destruction. I have seen it happen so many times! We have to be sure that anyone we admit to our little family, not only understands our ethic, but shares it. For anyone seeking admittance, there really is only one question: Are you one of us? Do you *belong*?'

Lindsay, unlike Colin, had listened to this speech quietly and without signs of impatience. It had left her very angry indeed. She had heard this argument, or variations upon it, many times; it shored up a variety of causes, and she was in sympathy with none of them. She was now in no doubt as to why Emily had raised this whole issue; Emily evidently still suspected her of designs on Colin, and she was being told, in no uncertain terms, that if she wished to be acceptable to his great aunt, she had better tow the line.

She looked at Emily carefully and saw that a game had been being played with her throughout the evening. Emily had treated her to an odd rag-bag of personae: there had been the Miss Havisham hauteur, the dotty aunt diversion, the dragon-lady, and the sibyl. Now Emily had morphed – and morphing was what it

resembled – yet again. She understood that Emily had been playing a game of several sets with her; now, having tested her, and manoeuvred her, and finagled her into some unwise net-play, she seemed convinced that these final hard base-line drives had won her the game. Lindsay was not sure which aspect of all this angered her most: Emily's assumptions as to her own marital intentions, or her calm conviction that, having stated her case thus, Lindsay would promptly back down.

Lindsay rose. 'We obviously think very differently,' she said, with great politeness. 'I'm sorry, but you asked for my opinion, and it hasn't changed. Now it's very late, and I've stayed far too long . . .'

'Oh dear, oh dear,' said Emily, with a sidelong glance at Colin. 'I suspect you think I'm a dreadful old reactionary, my dear.'

This was a well-timed lob; Lindsay decided to go for the overhead smash in return.

'Mistaken,' she said, 'unjust, and probably unwise.'

'Unwise, my dear?'

'Of course. All institutions have to adapt; even the Conrad. If they don't, they ossify. They become – fossilized.'

She paused. Emily had not taken either 'ossify' or 'fossilized' too kindly – and indeed, they sounded backhanded, Lindsay realized, given Emily's age. She at once regretted the terms; however strong her own feelings, she had no wish to upset a woman of eighty-five.

'Can we not agree to differ?' She held out her hand with a smile. 'I'm very glad to have seen the Conrad, and it was good of you to invite me . . .'

Good manners failed to conciliate. Emily stretched out her ossified and arthritic fingers, so the magnificent diamond flashed against the light.

'Do you know, Colin,' she remarked, her manner

peevish, as she briefly took Lindsay's hand, 'I feel tired. All this idealism must be exhausting me. Frobisher, will you? I think I must retire, and show this charming young woman back to her room. No, no, my dear, I insist. New York can be a very pleasant place at night. You need a man at your side.'

She took Lindsay's arm and began to go towards the door.

'So nice to have met you, my dear. I do hope to meet you again.' She peered at Lindsay, as if trying to remember who she was. 'So many things I wanted to ask you, but I forgot; my age, you know. Let me see . . . Oh, yes, I think you're going to write a book, I think?'

'I'm going to try, yes.'

'And move to the country too, I hear? Delicious!'

'It's what I'm hoping to do,' Lindsay began, feeling guilty and embarrassed. Emily was looking at her again, she could sense it. They were now talking about moving towards the country, and there were symptoms of the Bracknell, too.

'Lindsay thinks the country would be most economical, Em.'

'*Economical?*' Emily stared. 'In my experience the country is always *vastly* expensive. All that is the same. One never *stops* writing cheques . . .'

'I'm only looking for something small,' Lindsay began, edging towards the door. 'Just a hovel, really, not a house.'

'A novel?' Emily frowned. 'You're looking for a novel? Well, there are plenty of those these days, my dear. I have novels here – you're very welcome to borrow them. I prefer history – Gibbon, you know. I rarely read fiction, except on airplanes, when I get my teeth into something plump and juicy, like a novel of that *very* vulgar gold lettering. Ah, here's Fanny. Just trot along with her, my dear, and she'll find your coat. Perhaps you'd like to see the library. Shall we go your way out? We'll discuss novels, small or old.'

'I *told* you that. Courage, a kind heart and the most beautiful eyes in the world. Oh *God*. Give me the verdict. Have I a hope, Em?'

'*Fossilized!*' Emily laughed again. 'I did so enjoy that. She was outraged, you know – quite pink in the face. And I'd put my argument so *well*.'

'You were intolerable. You put her in an intolerable position. Why, why, why couldn't you stick to the line I wrote?'

'Because I'd have learned *nothing*. Instead of which and entirely thanks to me, I've learned everything I need to know.'

'Oh sure, and she's learned to hate you. Bloody great. That's really going to help me. Well done, Em.'

'Nonsense. She'll come around; she has a generous nature, and next time I'll be on my best behaviour, I promise . . .' She paused. 'Thanksgiving?'

'Maybe.' Their eyes met. 'But I'm not sure yet. I'm having to be very, very careful. I'm not going to mess this up, and none of it's easy. I want . . .'

He hesitated. 'I just want to take her in my arms all the time.'

'So I observed.'

'Oh God, *God*. You can't have done. You don't think she noticed? When I took her hand?'

'Oddly enough, no. But then she doesn't know you as well as I do . . . Could you stop walking up and down Colin? It's making me quite dizzy.'

'I'll have to go; she'll be waiting. Come on, Em, I want to know what you *think*.'

'We have a couple of minutes. Frobisher will keep her well out of earshot. Why can't I tell you when you get back from the Pierre? Always assuming, of course, that you *do* get back from the Pierre . . .'

'Because I have to know *now*. Em, please—'

'Have you given her the envelope yet?'

'No, I haven't. But I'm about to . . .' He stopped pacing

and his whole demeanour changed. 'Come on, Em,' he said, more quietly, 'put me out of my misery. I've made so many bloody mistakes, and this time it really matters. Am I right - yes or no?'

Emily found herself moved by his pallor and by the expression in his eyes. She knew the answer he wanted, for it was written in every line of his handsome face. Her expression became serious, and she looked at him in silence for some while.

'You're sure?' she asked at length.

'Totally.'

'You've considered the question of her age?'

'Oh, for God's *sake*, don't start on fertility *again*. It was inexcusable when you did that . . .'

'Colin, your family have lived at Shute for over four hundred years.'

'I don't bloody *care*.'

'There is the entail to consider, Colin.'

'Fuck the entail.'

Emily sighed. She saw the flash in his eyes as this statement was made and it affected her, since she had a weakness for passion and iconoclasm; she was also devoted to Colin and wished to see him happy, though in her experience, romance and contentment rarely went hand in hand.

'Colin, someone has to say this to you, so I will. She has a son approaching twenty; she may look much younger, but she must be forty at least. You are aware of the biological clock, as I believe . . . those days? Colin, do I have to spell this out?'

'No, I've already done those calculations.'

'And it doesn't alter your view?'

'It couldn't.' The blood washed down her face as she loved her, Em.'

Emily sighed. She found her nephew when he looked as he did now, and she loved him fondly, that many women, perhaps

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'No, I've already done those calculations.'

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'It couldn't.' The blood washed up into his face. 'I love her, Em.'

Emily sighed. She found her nephew hard to resist when he looked as he did now, and she felt, looking at him fondly, that many women, perhaps even Lindsay,

might have shared this view. Colin was indeed chivalric; he rode to the lists careless of the fact that he was vulnerable, and deeply so.

'Well, well – I begin to see that,' she said quietly. 'Colin, don't say any more, it will make me sentimental, and to be sentimental, at this juncture, will be of no assistance at all.' She sighed again. 'I'm not going to give you advice. Young men in your condition rarely listen to advice, however wise. And I have to admit, I liked her. The age is a very definite drawback – though, of course, even at forty, or forty-one, there is hope . . . But in many ways, she is just what you need, and I am not blind to that. She is honest – not an ounce of calculation, I thought. Also quite smart, amusing . . . Your father would adore her, and I think she would adore him. I can even see her at Shute . . .'

'So can I.'

'You're going to have to confess. A palace is a rather different kettle of fish to a hovel, Colin dear.'

'Shute isn't a palace; it's my *home*. And I'm going to explain all that to her . . .' Colin, recovering somewhat, gave her a glance that was half-anxious, half-amused. 'I have it all planned out, Em. I told you, I'm not going to risk losing her. This is a *campaign*.'

'So I see.' She laughed. 'I also see my verdict doesn't make two cents' worth of difference. If I'd said the opposite would that have changed your mind?'

'No.'

'So resolute! Well, well, you'd better go.'

'Do I have a chance, Em?'

Emily smiled, then sighed. 'As to that, I never make predictions. She likes you, which can be a good start. I wonder – have you any rivals, though?'

'Oh *God*, I don't know. I don't *think* so. I can't believe there aren't, but she claims there's no-one . . .'

'Does she indeed?' Emily gave Colin a small glance. 'Well, you've always been good at getting your way

when it mattered, Colin. You've been smart so far, I think . . .'

'I intend to go on being smart.'

'But I'm not too sure about the platonic approach; I wouldn't overdo it. Interesting what she said about men who dithered . . . I've always felt that the great secret of seduction is knowing *when* to make your move. Now, kiss me goodnight, you wicked boy, and don't keep her waiting any longer. Full speed ahead—'

'*Festina lente*,' Colin corrected, the glint of amusement returning to his eyes. '*Festina* very *lente* for at least the next two weeks. So I'll be back in half an hour.'

In the taxi-cab – and Colin proved as expert at summoning cabs as he was at summoning waiters – Colin established a most gentlemanly three inches of seat between them. Lindsay admired this.

'I'm sorry I was so long,' Colin said. 'I just had to calm Emily down a bit. She really is worried about the decision tomorrow.'

'She's obviously going to vote against—'

'I'm afraid so.'

'Ah well. I hope I didn't upset her. I'm feeling guilty now. I hope I wasn't too sanctimonious. She's not young, and it's predictable she'd feel as she does.'

'Don't worry about it. I've given her a far harder time. She doesn't mind, and she loves a good argument. In any case, she liked you. She's just been singing your praises . . .'

'I find that hard to believe.'

'No, no, you're wrong. She thought you were very pretty. She thought you had extraordinary eyes, truly beautiful, *candid* eyes.'

'Heavens,' said Lindsay, secretly gratified.

'And then, she admired your dress sense . . .' Colin gave her a sidelong glance, suppressing a smile. 'She particularly liked that white T-shirt thing you're

wearing . . .' Lindsay, remembering Pixie's comments on that T-shirt, blushed in the darkness of the cab.

'She said she liked your voice. She said it had a most attractive catch in it. Your sense of humour, she mentioned that . . .'

'Stop. Stop. I'll get swollen-headed.'

'Oh, and when you stood up to her, held your ground — she *adored* that.'

'Are you sure, Colin? I didn't get that impression at all.'

'I warned you she was odd — you mustn't be misled by her manner. Once you know her better, you'll begin to see—' He broke off. 'That is, if you meet her again. I hope you'll come to like her. She's a very good judge of character — of everything, in fact. I never make an important decision without consulting her . . .'

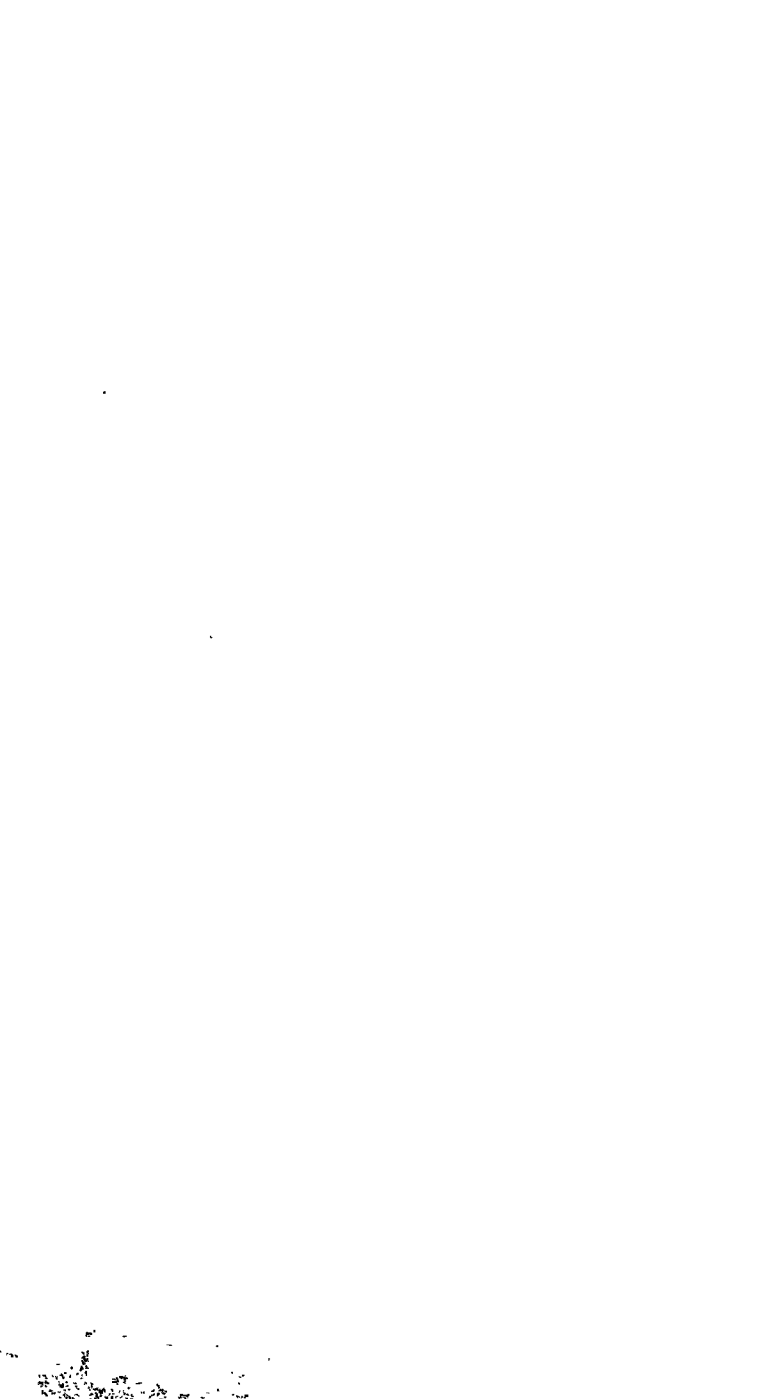
And do you take her advice?' Lindsay asked, struck to the heart.

'Not always, but I listen to her views.' He took Lindsay's hand in his. 'So, all in all, she was very glad to have met you.' He raised her hand to his lips, kissed it, and then released it. 'Very glad,' he repeated.

Lindsay, thrown by that kiss on the hand, stared at Colin, who had been gazing out at the passing lights in an abstracted way, glanced back with a smile. And so, in conclusion, she hopes you weren't too shocked by a crotchety octogenarian, and that you'll visit again before you leave New York . . . Ah, the Pierre. Well, we are. I'll just see you safely in. I'll tell the cabman, if I may.'

Lindsay preceded him into the Pierre. She felt flurried and dazzled as a result of that kiss on the hand. The cabman, idly waiting, she noted, as Colin completed his negotiations with its driver; that meant that Pixie's instructions were very wide of the mark.

Realizing this, Lindsay felt a certain disappointment. She did not want Colin Lascelles to make any advances



magic unguents, of yams and papaya juice. She lay against the closed door for several minutes, her heart rate slowed down. A short while later, she permitted herself to read the only one of her messages of any significance. It informed her that Mr McG had called at 11 p.m., and would call again the following morning, at nine, New York time.

Lindsay kissed this message several times and scheduled her next morning's activities in her mind. She reminded herself that, when this call came through, she would rigorously observe her new womanliness and sweetness of tongue. She paced about the room in a fervour; then, discovering that only two minutes of the day at a lifetime had passed, she examined Colin's mysterious envelope and opened it.

Inside was a brief note, in large writing she found difficult to decipher. Eventually she made out the words. His place belongs to someone my father knows. I have read the lease. It needs a loving tenant, I gather. Rent low. Maintenance negligible. Available now. Terms negotiable, but long let preferred. Could this be of interest to Colin?

The style of this note surprised Lindsay, who would not have expected terseness from Colin. Having read the note carefully twice, she turned to the enclosed photographs and stared at them in disbelief, then gave a gasp of delight. They showed an old, beautiful house, of medium size, which might once have housed a farming family. It had a steep lichened roof and walls of honeyed stone. Next to it was an ancient stone barn, in front of which chickens pecked in a perfect courtyard. It had a perfect cottage garden, with hollyhocks and lavender. There was a perfect stream, flowing through a perfect orchard, and the boughs of the trees there were weighted down with ripening apples. Beyond the garden and the orchard, lay the green serenity of English fields, bathed in the golden light of an English summer afternoon. 'Shute Farm,' Colin

had written on the back of one of the pictures. 'Twenty miles from Oxford.'

Lindsay could not believe her eyes. It was uncanny how closely this resembled the house of her dreams, as described several times to Colin. When she saw that, although it was not by any manner of means a hovel, it did have a rose, a crimson rose, trained around its door, she surrendered her heart to it.

She went to bed thoughtful and lay in the dark, suddenly fearful that she might dream of those ghosts at the Conrad. But her sleep was benign: she dreamed she was living in the magical house, writing an inspired biography, enjoying frequent visits from those two good friends, Colin Lascelles and Rowland McGuire. One afternoon, under those boughs of ripening apples in that orchard, Colin proposed to her again. This time, he was sober, and this time the proposal was witnessed by a silent Rowland McGuire. Lindsay was plucking an apple, and just about to give Colin her answer, when the dream took a new turn.

At the Conrad, Colin Lascelles did not even attempt sleep; in a fervour from that kiss on the cheek, in an agony of suspense as to Lindsay's reaction to the photographs, he felt it unlikely he would ever sleep again. He left Emily, together with Frobisher, to watch a late movie on television – it was one of their favourites, *Terminator II*. He retired to his own rooms at the far end of Emily's very large and labyrinthine apartment.

There, he paced up and down, tried to work, failed to work, discovered an urgent need to express himself, and picked up paper and pen. He wrote a long and impassioned letter to Lindsay Drummond, baring his heart. He covered six pages in his large sprawl, reread them, found them ill-phrased and inadequate, and decided instead to write to Rowland McGuire. He penned five pages to Rowland, explaining how grateful

he felt to him for bringing the miracle of Lindsay his way, then decided in mid-sentence that this confession might be premature.

Rowland was discreet, it was true; indeed, he was one of the most discreet men Colin had ever known, remaining as reserved and silent on the subject of his own affairs as he was on those of his friends. He was, however, an old friend and colleague of Lindsay; it was not impossible they would be in communication during her stay in New York, and not entirely impossible that Rowland might let something slip in conversation. Better to wait and apprise Rowland of his hopes, fears and joys later, he decided, remembering that he had already, some days before, sent Rowland a postcard that was somewhat over-emotional in tone. He reread what he had written and found both letters weighty with facts. They had tried to cure Colin of adverbs at public school; now a rash of them had broken out. He was 'deeply' and 'tenderly' and 'unbelievably' 'eternally' just in the space of two lines.

He ripped both letters into confetti, consigned them to a metal waste-bin, then, knowing both Emily and Fisher were capable of snooping, set fire to them. He held his hand, scorched a fine Persian rug and filled the room with choking smoke. Waving his arms and shouting, he leaped across to the window and flung it open. It had begun raining; the air was chilly and the mist hung above the trees of Central Park. He looked out at the same moon Tomas Court had found so cold and sickly, and it seemed to him enchanting, like a silvery city, a Manhattan of monochrome. But the constant restless surge of the city and the endless panic of its sirens disturbed him. When they entered too much into his reverie, he closed the window again and leaned against the glass, surrendering to the homesickness for Shute that was never far from him and which now welled up in his heart.

He thought of the peace of its parkland, the grace and charm of Shute Court's south façade. Beautiful in all weathers and all lights, the great house had a particular magic by moonlight. Perhaps, he thought, he could contrive it so that Lindsay saw Shute at night and by moonlight, when he showed it to her for the first time.

A week after she moved into the estate farmhouse, perhaps? Two weeks? He wanted her to have time to fall in love with the beauties of the place, but he knew that once she was actually there, his deceptions could not be protracted too long, and the risk of accidental discovery was strong. He would have liked to take her there now, he thought; he wished that, at this very moment, they were walking hand in hand through the copse and out into the enchantment of the deer park.

Within seconds, he was seeing, then scripting, this first encounter; then he was scripting Lindsay's first meeting with his father – a little difficult this, for although Colin loved his father dearly, he knew his eccentricities were marked. Then he was introducing Lindsay to his two beloved lurcher dogs, Daphnis and Chloe; now they were in the Great Hall, now in the kitchen, and suddenly, he discovered, in his bedroom, in the peace and privacy of which room, Lindsay began to say and do the most marvellous things.

Colin lay down on his bed and closed his eyes; his imagination now beginning to gallop, he gave it a lover's free rein. He worshipped the roundness of Lindsay's breasts and the smoothness of her thighs; he discovered she possessed a loving agility; locked in each others arms, they were just moving from a long adagio of kisses and caresses towards a crescendo of desire, when the telephone rang.

Colin looked at his bedside clock, discovered it was three in the morning, and was immediately certain that only one person in the world could be telephoning now. He grabbed the telephone, waited for that wonderful

erent voice of Thalia Ng.
rappled with this disappointment and its
effect. Gradually it began to register that
ce, was not swearing, and that she sounded
nd alarmed.

r help,' she was saying. 'Get a cab. Colin,
m to TriBeCa—'

Now?'

s's loft. And make it fast.'

opped him on the corner of Court's street.
into it, he heard voices and running feet,
of a vehicle's doors. He saw that a long
tified van, too small to be a hospital
ut possibly a private one, was pulling
ourt's building. It moved off fast, without
iren, but with the blue light on its roof
ut of the shadows of the street and striking
olin's heart. He ran the last few yards,
uilding and, ignoring the elevator, ran fast.
The door to the loft was wide open and
see Thalia Ng, standing on the far side of
k work table where they had both spent
eceding day.

d forward into the doorway, questions on
stopped dead as he saw the extent of the
room beyond. He stared around him, in
wilderment. 'Oh dear God,' he said, in a
rist — what's happened here?'

upporting herself, he realized, by leaning
le. Her face was drained of all colour and
ling.

ne,' she began, in a low unsteady voice.
an hour ago. I came straight over. I called
n home, before I left, because I could tell
ice, the way he was breathing . . .' She

fumbled for a chair, then sat down. 'Shut the door, I need a drink — find me something. Brandy, Scotch whatever. I don't care.'

'He doesn't drink . . .' Colin closed the door, looked around him helplessly. He took a step forward, heard glass crunch under his feet, and realized that it was blood on the floor.

'I know, but he keeps some for other people. I'll get a cup from the cupboard over there.'

Colin made his way to the cupboard with care. The passage was blocked by up-ended, smashed chairs, a blizzard of paper, ripped photographs and coffee can. Cinefilm. One of the cupboard doors had been wrenched off its hinges and most of its contents lay smashed and spilled on the floor. At the back of it, he found an unopened bottle of bourbon and one wineglass. He brought these back to the table, righted a chair and sat down next to Thalia.

'Here,' he said. 'Drink it slowly—'

Thalia took a swallow, half choked, then swallowed a little more. Colin looked at her untidy frizz of grey hair and at her clothes, which had obviously been buttoned on in a hurry. He realized that she was much older than he had first thought, nearer sixty than fifty, and that she had been crying. Gently, he took her hand.

'Take your time. Thalia, can I get you something else? Tea? Sweet tea? You've had a shock—'

'Tea? Are you kidding?' Some colour had returned to Thalia's face. 'You have a cigarette? I know you smoke sometimes—'

Colin hesitated, his eye caught by one of Colin's asthma inhalers, lying amidst shreds of paper on the floor.

'It's OK. Tomas would forgive us, in the circumstances. Besides, he isn't here . . .'

Colin lit cigarettes for both of them. Thalia inhaled, then, to Colin's consternation, began crying again.

'I thought he was dead,' she began. 'I thought he was dead. I walked in and he was lying on the floor right there, and I thought I was too late. Oh shit.' She pulled off her glasses, and rubbed at her eyes ineffectually. Colin produced a handkerchief and handed it across. Thalia looked at this immaculate square of white linen, laughed, then began to cry again.

'I might have known you'd carry one of those. You're just so goddamn English, you know that?'

'Sorry,' said Colin, 'I do try. I just seem to revert now and then.'

Thalia laughed again and dried her eyes. She took another swallow of bourbon and another deep inhalation of her cigarette.

'You're OK,' she said at length, in a shaky voice. 'Tomas thinks so. I think so – and that's why you're here. Tomas doesn't have any friends. I couldn't call Mario, because he talks. In fact, I couldn't think of anyone who *wouldn't* talk, and then I thought of you.'

'I won't say anything.' He looked around at the chaos of the room. 'Thalia, what in God's name happened? Is Tomas all right?'

'No.' She blew her nose. 'Shit, my hands won't stop shaking.' She swallowed a little more bourbon. 'No, it's not all right. He hasn't been all right for quite a long time. The asthma's worse and – there are other problems: stress, overwork, lack of sleep, anxiety.' She looked away. 'So – something happened here tonight, and I don't know what it was. There'd been a break-in, I guess. Tomas – someone had hit him. His hands were bleeding and there was this gash on his face, but the doctor said that wasn't serious . . .'

'But he'd collapsed?'

'Yes. He was semi-conscious; he couldn't speak. It was a bad asthma attack – one of the worst I've seen.' She broke off and stubbed out the cigarette, grinding it in an angry way in a broken saucer that lay among the

ripped papers on the table. 'But he's going to be OK. The doctor says so. He will be OK. Rest, medication, they'll pull him around. Meantime, I need your help. You're going to help me clean up this shit here.' He gestured around the room. 'And you're going to help me fix up a convincing cover story, because we need one, fast.'

'A cover story?' Colin looked at her in confusion. 'Why, Thalia? Shouldn't we call the police? Nat Lawrence – have you called her, Thalia? She has to know—'

'She'll know in my good time, if at all. I don't want her involved now, and Tomas wouldn't either. As for the cops – no way. Give me another cigarette and explain.'

Colin lit another cigarette for her; she drew on it, sighed. 'You know how hard it's been for Tomas to get health insurance on this movie?' she began. 'Very hard. He had to have three different medicals. The doctors didn't like the condition he was in, and they liked him a whole lot less when they found out he was facing a twelve-week shooting schedule in the north of England in winter. The insurers finally signed a week ago, but they put in a back-out clause: any worsening of condition before the start date and they withdraw cover. You know what that means? No movie is what it means. This movie has a seventy million dollar budget – you've seen the figures. Unless Tomas is insured, the studio stands to lose most of that if he cracks up during filming. They won't risk that. No insurance, and they'll pull the plug on the entire project . . . So, no-one finds out what happened tonight, you understand?'

'Of course I understand. But Thalia, this can't wait. You can't keep this sort of thing under wraps. What about the doctor tonight? The ambulance men?'

'His doctor will keep his mouth shut. He's paid to do that, and paid well. They've taken Tomas to a private

clinic so fucking discreet you'd think the CIA was running it. He's been there before. He goes in under an assumed name and he comes out under an assumed name, and if anyone there recognizes him, they get a fit of amnesia, you understand? The doctor says two or three days should do it. Then he flies back to Montana and he stays in Montana. I'm going to make him do that until we're ready to film. And as far as the studio is concerned, or anyone else connected with this movie is concerned – including Mario motor mouth – Tomas is in Montana now. Change of plan: he flew out here tonight – you got that?"

'Will that work?'

Thalia shrugged. 'It's worked before.'

There was a silence. Colin began to understand. He began to see why there might have been those months of uncertainty as to Tomas Court's exact whereabouts. He began to see why, when he was location searching, it had sometimes proved so difficult to locate his director. He began to understand, now, the numerous occasions when, unable to reach Tomas Court himself, he had had to wait for Court to contact him.

'Thalia, how ill is he?' he asked.

'I don't know.' Her face contracted. 'I just know he's better when he's actually working. He's better when he isn't breathing in all the filth in this fucking city, and he's better when he's away from that ex-wife of his, as well.'

'Why?'

'Because he loves her too much. It's like a sickness with him.' Her face took on a closed expression. She rose. 'Anyway – that isn't my business, and it certainly isn't yours. I'll call her later today and tell her Tomas had to go back out to Montana. I'll say some suit is flying out from the Coast to see him there—'

'Thalia, you can't do that. He's ill; he's in hospital – what if something happened to him?'

'It won't, and I can't think of a quicker way to bring on another attack than have her weeping by his bedside. I'm telling you, he won't want her to know. He never does—'

'Why not, for God's sake?' Colin burst out. 'Why all this secrecy? They were *married*; they have a child—'

'He doesn't like her to see him sick.' Thalia made a grimace. 'He doesn't like her to see him weak. And you know what? He's right. That woman can smell weakness in a man the way a shark scents blood in the ocean.'

'That's ridiculous. That can't be true.'

'It is true. I know her. Take it from me.'

Her tone was very certain. Colin looked at her, then sank his head in his hands. He could feel unease welling up inside him; his mind felt dazed and confused. Lack of sleep was beginning to tell on him, but he knew the problem lay deeper than that. He did not have the right kind of intelligence, or perhaps character, to understand the complexities here. Love was love, he said to himself, and he could not understand why it should be twisted into some power game. How could love be a sickness? Love seemed to him both direct and simple: he loved his father; he had loved his brother; he loved friends such as Rowland; he tried to imagine his relationship with Lindsay in terms of deceit or malaise or a power struggle and found it unimaginable. Just to prevent himself from making a declaration, from flinging himself at her feet as it were, required all his self-control. Love ought to be freely and openly given, he thought, looking around him at the chaos of this room. He could not wait to tell Lindsay the truth. Why did people feel the need to distort love with lies and evasions and pretences? Then it occurred to him that those who did so perhaps enjoyed greater success than he himself had done. His own record, of pursuit by women who proved to be interested only in his money, or of rejection from

women who preferred colder men to Colin, was no advertisement for the virtues of baring the soul.

He rose to his feet and tried to focus his mind on the realities of this room. It looked as if a fight had taken place in it, as if Tomas Court had surprised an intruder, yet the damage here, it seemed to him, was greater than any fight could explain. A fight might account for the broken chairs, smashed china and glass, but surely not for this blizzard of torn papers covering the floor, and not for a leather sofa, oozing rubberized stuffing, a sofa that someone seemed to have tried to disembowel.

He passed his hands across his face and turned back to Thalia.

'I still don't understand. What can have happened? When Tomas called you, did he explain?'

'No. He could scarcely speak. He just asked me to come over. When I got here, the door was wide open and Tomas was on the floor, like I said. There was no-one else here—'

'But who would do this? Has anything been stolen?'

'There was nothing to steal.'

'Is it just this room?'

'No.' She hesitated. 'He'd been in the bedroom too. I — I closed the door. You'll have to deal with that. I'm not going in there.'

Her tone was flat. Colin bent and picked up at random some of the papers torn and scattered at his feet. He leaned towards the light on the table and began to examine them. The first was a copy of the *New York Times* Arts section, dated a few days previously; it was folded back at an interview with Natasha Lawrence he had already seen, an anodyne piece written by someone called Genevieve Hunter, whom Lindsay had mentioned she knew. The photograph of Natasha Lawrence had been smeared with some whitish substance. The quote referring to her future home in the Hollywood hills had been circled in green ink; the words LIAR

BITCH CUNT had been written next to it in capitals

He began to feel sick. He dropped the newspaper and examined the other fragments of paper one by one. Some he recognized as the various revised shooting schedules that had been littering the table the previous day. There were several others which concerned the Conrad building, some torn from books, others, to judge from their paper and wording, from architectural journals. Finally, there were scraps of what appeared to be letters, handwritten, again in capitals, and again in green ink. He peered at the words, which seemed to concern Natasha Lawrence and bodyguards; then he came across the first reference to animals. He crumpled and let the scraps of paper fall.

Thalia, who had been watching him in silence, gave a gesture towards the sea of fragments covering the floor. Colin saw there were more communications in green ink, hundreds of them, perhaps more, all of them ripped and shredded and trampled upon.

'You've heard about Joseph King?' Thalia said, her face expressionless.

'Yes. Mario told me.'

'You heard he might have died, last June – killed himself maybe?'

'No, I didn't know that.'

'That was what people hoped. Those are his letters. Five years' worth of letters—'

'But he can't be dead,' Colin picked up the newspaper, then held it out to her. 'Green ink, the same writing. This paper is dated four days ago.'

'I know. I saw it before you arrived. In fact . . .' Thalia paused, 'it's partly why I called you. I got afraid. I think he's been here tonight. I think Tomas caught him in the act of going through these letters. I think he's been listening to the tapes of his phone calls as well . . .'

'Those tapes in the bedroom? Those are *his*?' Colin stared at her. 'I saw them yesterday – the door was open'

Thalia, why would Tomas keep them? I don't stand.'

'He likes listening to them. Don't ask me, I wouldn't dare ask him and I prefer not to know. Those tapes were playing when I arrived and probably still playing now. I wasn't going to go in that room and I won't now.' She gave herself a little shake. 'So you're going to have to do it. You're going to take the fucking thing off, then we're taking all the tapes, we're going to box them up along with the rest of the filth. Then I'm taking it all away and I'm getting it burned, which is something I should have done a long time ago . . .'

'Thalia, we can't do that; we don't have the right. This is Tomas's property, in the first place – and second, it's evidence. We have to call the police.'

'This stuff is killing Tomas.' She turned away. 'I've watched it poison him and I'm not watching it any more. And we *don't* call the police. We do that and this story's splashed across the tabloids tomorrow. There'll be reporters and photographers crawling all over the place. They'll have tracked Tomas down to that club by tonight. Some ass-hole cop will be slipping them into some contact of his, and before you know it, the whole thing will be all over the front pages, and the *London Enquirer* will be taking their marriage apart . . .'

'Thalia – I said call the police, not Reuters.'

'Same thing in this city.'

'Thalia, no newspaper would print this stuff. I've gestured towards the sea of papers. *'They couldn't print it – and they wouldn't. Why would they? King's sane, that's obvious. Who would print this kind of allegation?'*

'You've been reading the wrong newspapers.' She gave him a derisive look. 'And don't make the mistake of thinking King's just some crazy fantasist; he is sane. He likes to mix a little fact in with his fictions. You

this would have obsessed Tomas the way it has if it were all sick lies from start to finish? No way. King's better than that, and a whole lot smarter. It's because Tomas knew King was telling the truth about *his* activities, that he thought he just might be telling the truth about Natasha as well.'

Colin felt that sick unease begin to rise in his stomach again. He picked up a scrap of one of the letters, then quickly let it fall.

'He couldn't have believed this – *surely* he couldn't have believed this . . . ' he began.

Thalia gave him a tired look. 'I think he believed some of it, some of the time. Maybe he even *wanted* to believe it. I'm not arguing with you about this; I'm getting tired of this stuff, the tapes *and* the letters, so you've got a straight choice: either you help me or you go.'

She sat down at the table as she said this, and suddenly exhausted, and ran her hands through her fringes of grey hair. Colin hesitated. His instinct was still to call the police, to believe that they could bring order, justice and due punishment to whatever crime, or crimes, had been committed here. He looked at the blood splash on the floor and the sea of incriminatory paper.

'Let me check the bedroom,' he said. 'I'll switch the tape off, then I'll decide.'

He crossed to the far end of the loft, opened the door in that bare, brutal brick wall, and moved into the corridor, feeling for the light switch. The ugly neon flickered into life; he could hear a low, level, Midwestern voice, speaking with a pedantic insistence, as soon as he opened the door.

He paused in the bedroom doorway, feeling suddenly afraid, watching the small red warning light come on above the bed. The room was tidy and apparently untouched. That brownish bed cover was uncrumpled, the pillows bore the faint impress of a head, but might have been that way before.

Although the havoc of the outer room was not repeated here, he could sense disturbance in the air. It emanated from the tape recorder and the quiet murmuring voice, and it made him feel he was breathing in contagion; he could sense it as soon as he entered, some toxicity breeding here.

He moved across to the surgical table and the large outdated machine. He began to fumble in the half light with the machine's unfamiliar switches and dials. 'Hot hot and moist,' said a voice, very loudly, right in his ear. He started back, realizing that by mistake he had turned up the volume control.

He backed away to the door, trying to close his mind to this spillage of words. He found the light switch and depressed it, but no light came on. He returned to the machine and bent over it, his hands now unsteady trying to make sense of its battery of controls. He began pressing switches at random, but the twin spools continued to rotate and the voice continued speaking. 'Naked in bed,' Colin heard. He turned another dial and the voice sank to a whisper, a whisper he found more insidious and more discomfiting. 'Absolute lust, shall I tell you what she did next?' whispered the voice, and to his horror Colin found he wanted to know.

He slammed his palm against a whole row of switches then, when that produced no effect, began a frantic search for the mains' plug. The machine's cables snaked away from the surgical table and disappeared under the bed. The electric point seemed to be at the head of the bed, under the *Dead Heat* altarpiece. He began to push and pull at the bed in order to reach behind it, but the bed, monstrously large, monstrously heavy, mounted on some box-like plinth, refused to move.

Abandoning this, he straightened, stared at the machine and found himself mesmerized. '*Such dexterity . . . were satisfied . . . the supervisor grossly . . . swallow them up.*' Colin watched the tape wind from the right

spool to the left. The room seemed to be growing hotter and hotter; he could feel himself being lured down some whispering corridor of words, around this corner and into room after hidden room.

He knew that the words were affecting him; his body began to stir in response to the description of acts he abhorred. He felt a giddiness, a compulsion to continue listening, then the voice made a small mistake: 'She loved it,' it pronounced with a sigh, and Colin's senses returned, for love was not the emotion being described here.

A sudden cleansing anger surged through his body. Reaching across, he grasped hold of the tape and wrenched it out of the machine. It coiled about his wrist and voided itself with a high-pitched squeaky scream. He pulled harder, and yards of the stuff spilled out like entrails; he caught hold of the machine, which proved immensely heavy, picked it up bodily and flung it down. Its casing cracked open, sparks flew, there was a blue, scorching, flashing tongue of light, a smell of burning, then a fizzling sound.

Colin returned to the main room of the loft. Thalia, who was kneeling on the floor, stuffing handfuls of papers in boxes, looked up at him.

'You'll help me?' she asked.

'I've already started. I'll find a trash can,' Colin replied.

They worked side by side, in virtual silence, for several hours. Shortly before six, Thalia telephoned Mario to cancel that morning's meeting and to inform him that Tomas Court had returned to Montana; Mario received this information without surprise.

Half an hour later, when the first thin light began to tint the sky, their task was completed. The bags and boxes of toxic waste, as Colin now thought of them, were stacked at the door awaiting disposal. Thalia was about to call the clinic, to check on Tomas Court's progress;

Colin, exhausted and troubled, was standing at the loft windows, watching a slow Manhattan dawn. At the cat, he saw, was emerging from an alleyway; he watched it nose the trash cans. He was trying to think of Linda and finding he could not do so here, when the telephone rang.

'Tomas never picks up. He always lets the answering phone field the calls.' Thalia looked at him uncertainly. 'But it could be the clinic . . .'

Colin crossed to her side, feeling a sudden uneasiness. They both waited as the telephone rang three times. The intercept kicked in. 'Leave any message after the tone,' said a tinny mechanical voice; silence ensued. Thalia gave a nervous gesture; Colin leaned close to the answering machine. He thought he could hear breathing, then a strange rhythmic sighing sound, like the sea. When the now familiar Midwestern voice finally spoke it startled him.

'Testing, testing, testing,' said the voice. 'Just checking your machine, checking your machine . . .'

XI

'Not a nice place, that labyrinth,' Markov was saying to Lindsay, at 9.23 the same morning. 'All those sacrifices, Lindy. A definite reek of blood and bone. Even I could sense it, and Jippy didn't like it at all . . .'

Not for the first time in her life, Lindsay cursed Markov's addiction to the telephone. Since 8.55, the entire world had decided to call her. First it had been Pixie; then, on the dot of nine, Gini Lamartine, wanting to cancel Thanksgiving in Washington ('I'll call you back,' Lindsay had cried); next, Max had called and received very short shrift. There was then two minutes of agonizing silence, before the next caller proved to be that mumbling person from Lulu Sabatier's office, wanting to speak to Ms Drummond urgently.

'She's *dead*,' Lindsay cried. 'She died suddenly. Go away.'

At 9.15, it had been Markov. Lindsay had already had four minutes on the subject of the lunch he and Jippy had just finished – *retsina* and *moussaka*; delicious, but Jippy had no appetite at all – and four minutes on the palace of Knossos; she did not intend to have any more.

'Markov,' she interrupted, 'will you get off this line? I'm not *interested* in minotaurs. I told you, I'm waiting for a very important call.'

'You're insensitive, you know that, Lindy?' Markov yawned. 'Thanks to the miracles of modern technology, darling, this is your friend calling you from the other side of the world. How's Gotham City? Whose call?'

'I'm hanging up, Markov. I'm hanging up in twenty seconds . . .'

'Tell me, Lindy, just to set my heart at rest, sweetling — this call wouldn't be from a certain Rowland McGuire, would it? You remember him? The answer to every maiden's prayer? Otherwise known as Mr Blind, Mr Unobtainable and Mr Conspicuously Bad News?'

'No, it damn well isn't. It's — it's work, that's all. G'bye, Markov. Ten seconds and counting . . .'

'Jippy wants a word.'

Jippy might have wanted a word, but as usual he had difficulty in pronouncing it. Desperate now, Lindsay stared at the hands of her bedside clock; she could hang up on Markov without compunction, but not Jippy — that would be too cruel. She listened to Jippy fight soundly, she saw his gentle, steady, brown-eyed gaze, that expression of dog-like fidelity; she remembered the last time she had spoken to him and felt the brush of unease. It took Jippy one and a half minutes to utter a sound.

'-h-hell,' he said finally. Lindsay waited for the last part of the greeting; it never came.

'Sorry about that.' After a pause, Markov came back to her. 'I told you, Jippy's upset. He's picking up some strange vibrations here . . .'

'Where?' Lindsay asked, jolted by Jippy's truncated greeting and giving a small shiver. 'Where? In Knossos? In Crete, you mean?'

'Kind of.' There was a pause; some whispering. 'Anyhow, he sends love. He says, take care.'

'Listen Markov, I send you both my love too, but I'm hanging up, I have to—'

'No problems. We'll see you soon anyway. Back for Christmas giving in Gotham City, that's the plan. I might take a swim now. The wine-dark sea beckons . . . Give my fondest love to Rowland, darling. Oh, and here's my message for him. Tell him, he who hesitated has been told. Tell him, serves him *right*, because if he'd listened

ome years ago, he wouldn't be up shit creek without a compass now. And tell him Jippy says—'

'What? What?'

'Jippy says, Frailty thy name is woman.' Markov laughed. 'Bye, *mia cara*,' he added, and with his usual annoying timing, rang off.

Lindsay glared at the telephone. The trouble with gay men, she told herself, was that they did not understand women at all. They might like to think they did but they were invariably wrong.

Minutes ticked. Mr Blind, Mr Unobtainable did not call. She would give him another five minutes. Lindsay decided, at 9.40, and then she would leave.

She had taken Colin and Thalia a long time to load the bags and boxes of toxic waste into her station wagon. Thalia announced that when she had finished with them she would be going out to the clinic to see Tom. 'You know that ex-wife of his is trying to buy an apartment there?' she said, standing some distance from him, next to the open door of her car.

Colin felt as if he were drowning, possibly in happiness, or confusion, or slime; he focused on the question with difficulty.

'I know. It seemed better not to mention it—'

'Wise,' said Thalia. 'With Tomas, the art is knowing when to speak and when to keep your mouth shut. He respects silence.' She frowned. 'Have you met Tom?'

'No.'

'Well, when you do, you'll see. He's been in the silence a long time ago.'

Her tone was pejorative. 'Tom's a quiet man.'

'Sure. In her case, silence can be a weapon. But she made no further comment. Colin looked at her and appeared. He stood in the deserted street, looking at the darkened buildings; a steady rain had begun to fall.

was still early, not seven yet; the day seemed reluctant to begin, and the city was unusually silent. Distant, and filtered by buildings, he could just hear the growl of traffic, as if some somnolent leviathan sensed dawn and stirred.

He felt light-headed and disoriented from lack of sleep. He knew there was a cross-street less than two blocks away where he could pick up a cab, yet felt he had no idea which way to turn. He was tired, yet hyper-alert; he felt dirty and anxious to wash off all trace of King's communications from his hands; he felt afraid, and had done ever since he heard that low, oddly ringing voice come through on the answering machine. 'Testing, testing, *testing*.' He glanced over his shoulder, swung around, suddenly sensing someone behind him, as close as a shadow. There was no-one. The street was empty. From some domain beyond racks of trash cans, a cat yowled.

He had to walk, he discovered, when he had already walked two blocks. He had to walk, move his body, breathe air; he had no wish to wait for a cab, or to be in a cab, or to have to speak to anyone, even to give directions. He had to walk and force the night's events out of his mind. He paused, looking back at the towers of the financial district to his south, where the light was beginning to crest the money citadels with gold. Then he went off north, swinging his arms, breathing in carbon monoxide as if it were the freshest mountain air. He left Little Italy, plunged on north through the charms of the West Village, and found himself in the Garment District, where the trucks were already drawn up, disgorging rails of clothes. It was winter and it was cold, and he was pushing past diaphanous summer dresses. He bumped against something gauzy, thought of Lindsay, and wondered what professional territory this was, and felt a longing for her so fierce and so sudden it was like being punched in the heart.

This was where his footsteps had been leading him he realized. Lindsay could heal him; she could rid him of this sensation – which he still had, long after leaving the chaos of Court's loft – that he was treading on broken glass.

But he could not see Lindsay as he was now. He felt dirty, coated with grime, besmirched; he could not rid himself of the sensation that Joseph King's words had got under his fingernails and were adhering to his hair. Two men, he felt, had stood in Tomas Court's bedroom a few hours before, and two men had confronted the tape recorder. One, the Colin he recognized and thought he knew, had wanted to silence that voice; the other, some *dopplegänger*, some other Colin whom he loathed and feared, liked the voice and its story. It was familiar to him, as if he and not King had determined it; he knew every twist of its plot, longed to hear its climaxes and saw, with a dark and resonant pleasure, how it must inevitably end. Which man had failed to find the switch-off mechanism? Colin thought now, quickening his pace – and was he entirely sure which of these two selves was drawing him northwards to Lindsay now?

He crossed 42nd Street, that Manhattan divide, and pressed on, the rain falling more heavily now. He was on Fifth, and approaching a gilded area of the city although he scarcely saw the lighted windows and was blind to their promise of luxury. He did not see the furs, the exquisite shoes, or the jewels; he did not see the temptations arrayed for Thanksgiving, or sense the allure of commerce's pre-Christmas display. Blind to Saks, to Tiffany's and to Bergdorf's, he fixed his eyes on the bare trees of Central Park up ahead, crossed by the Plaza, caught the smell of the poor blinkered horses who waited there to ferry tourists, even in winter, even in rain, and finally glimpsed, up ahead of him, the dark squat bulk of the Conrad, the bellying of its rounded turrets and the expectancy of its many dormer eyes.

How many blocks had he walked? Fifty? Sixty? More? He had lost count long ago. He stumbled into Emily's apartment, drenched to the skin. There Frobisher, who had known him all his life, fussed over him and exclaimed, but he brushed aside these ministrations; all he could think about was a bath, a shower, the cleansing effect of water and the urgency of seeing Lindsay. Pushing past Frobisher, he was waylaid by Emily, who seemed to be in a great state of excitement about something. She bombarded him with sentences; she was getting ready for the crucial board meeting; she couldn't find her pearls; she had discovered she was *wearing* her pearls; she had already spoken to Biff and Henry Fox on the telephone, and *something was going on . . .*

'Going on? Going on?' Colin did not know what his aunt was talking about; nor, at that moment, did he care.

'What time is it? What time is it?' he said over his shoulder, hurrying on down the corridor.

'Wheels within wheels,' he heard her call after him. '*Wheels*; and I can darned well hear them turning.' Frobisher, Frobisher, which purse shall I take? The lizard, or the crocodile?

Colin slammed his door on her agitations. He went to look at his watch, a twenty-first birthday present from his father, and found he was not wearing it. He began on a frantic search, on his chest of drawers, bedside table, on the floor. Then he remembered, felt in the pocket of his coat, felt in the pocket of his masterly suit and discovered it. He peered at its dial in disbelief. Past nine? How could it be past nine? What had happened to the hours?

He plunged across to the telephone and dialled the Pierre.

'I have to see you,' he said. 'Lindsay - I have to see you this morning, *now*. Can you wait for me? I'll - have to - I'll be with you within the hour . . .'

He thought she said yes, she would wait. He put down

the phone, turned on the shower and started pulling off his clothes. Then he realized he was uncertain what she had said. Was it yes? Was it no? Had a time been mentioned? He dived back to the phone. He punched in the numbers. It rang through to Lindsay's room, his watch told him, at precisely 9.45. Lindsay answered on the first ring.

'Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes,' she said. 'I told you. I'll be here.'

She replaced the receiver at once. Colin felt a soaring of the spirits. He pulled off his clothes, kicked the masterly dirty suit into a corner, kicked the shirt and the silk foulard tie and the handmade shoes and the socks and the boxer shorts after it. He turned the water full on. He glimpsed his own nakedness in the mirrors and stepped into the hail of the shower.

Rowland McGuire's call finally came through at 9.52. By then, those demons she fought so unsuccessfully had tormented Lindsay into a great state of nerves. Despite the fact that, of all the female characteristics with which she was richly endowed, a propensity to sit by a telephone and hope was the one she most loathed and despised, she had found herself trapped in that room at the Pierre. She was well acquainted with every inch of its carpet as she paced round and round. It was disconcerting, at exactly 9.45 – the time she had convinced herself Rowland would call – to pick up the receiver and hear a man tell her he had to see her, when the voice telling her this was the wrong voice, and the man, much as she liked him, was the wrong man.

At 9.46, having hung up on Colin, she had got herself as far as the door. By 9.47 she was back again at the bed, staring at the telephone with joy in her heart. She had just realized that if Rowland's call the night before came through at eleven New York time, it must have been placed in London at four in the morning. For a

brief instant, this fact filled her with hope. She imagined Rowland, in the dead of night, afflicted with torments similar to her own. Then she saw the obvious explanation: Rowland, who did not suffer torments, had called at 4 a.m. because he happened to have returned home then – and her swift and deadly imagination had no difficulty in seeing just why he might have returned so late, and why he had been detained.

A brief sojourn in heaven; a swift and predictable descent to hell. Will I never be free of this bondage? Lindsay thought, feeling the familiar shackles lock into place. She turned back to the door, resolving on liberty; the telephone rang, and she found all desire for liberty had gone.

She let it ring three times, out of pride, and in an attempt to calm herself. Sweet, womanly, *dulcet*, she reminded herself. She snatched up the receiver, heard Rowland's voice, and experienced, as she always did, the same fatal joy. It was short-lived. Within sentences, she saw that this conversation was stilted and unusually awkward; this panicked her; she sensed an alteration in Rowland's manner, and this panicked her more.

He was not addressing her with his usual friendly warmth; if anything, his manner was cautious and guarded, even cold. He sounded as if he were feeling his way into this conversation with care, trusting neither himself nor her. He sounded, in short, like a stranger, and not like the man she had known for three years.

Where was that usual fraternal ease, that relaxed willingness to discuss what each of them had been doing and where each had been? It was gone, utterly gone – the rules of their dialogue had changed. What could have happened in the space of just a week to effect such a change? Lindsay's mind froze over. She felt like an actor whose script had just been torn from his hand; she was left with scraps and tatters of memorized speeches

and an urgent need to improvise her way back into the scene.

It might have been easier to do that, had Rowland been giving her clear and simple cues, but she found he was not doing that. She was stranded mid-stage, unable to hear the prompter, desperate to communicate with a fellow actor who sounded as stranded and uneasy as she. She stared at the wall. What was *wrong*? Had Rowland changed or had she?

Concentrate, concentrate, she said to herself. How did this halting dialogue begin? Rowland had presaged his remarks by explaining, somewhat irritably, that he had been trying to get through since 8.55. Sounding agitated – and Rowland never sounded agitated – he had added that he had a meeting shortly and so could not talk for long.

‘I’d hoped,’ he had said, ‘to reach you last night. It would have been almost exactly a week since I last spoke to you – and we wouldn’t have been worrying about time . . .’

Time! As soon as he used the word, Lindsay started gabbling inanities. She realized that Colin Lascelles would be arriving here soon. She could hear some inexorable clock ticking; she could see its pendulum swing. It was important, it was vital, to strike the right tone, to say the right thing.

Then – what had happened then? Rowland had cut her inanities short. Had he done so in an irritable way? No. He had interrupted in a dry, even patient way, so for a second Lindsay glimpsed the man she knew.

‘I received that burst of Morse,’ he said, hesitating. ‘At least, I think I did. Lindsay—’

Then he had stopped short. Whatever he had been about to say, he seemed to find it impossible to pronounce. He was as silent as Jippy, and Lindsay panicked again. Some idiot, she thought, some *dolt* has cut us off.

‘Rowland, are you there?’ she said, now very agitated.

'Yes, I'm here.'

'Oh, thank goodness. I thought . . .'

'Can you hear me all right? You sound odd, Lindsay. You sound different. I—'

'Yes, yes. I can hear you perfectly . . .'

'You're sure?'

Why ever was he insisting on this point, Lindsay thought. It was wasting time; it was using up precious seconds.

'Yes, I hear you as clear as a bell, as if you were in the same room and standing next to me. It's just . . .'

'What?'

'Nothing. You have that meeting. I — I'm worrying about time . . .'

'Then I'll come to the point. Wasn't I supposed to be testing that famous intuition of yours?'

Rowland did not sound as if the prospect of doing so gave him amusement. He sounded oddly *formal*, Lindsay thought; and try as she would, she could not concentrate fully on what he was saying. She was beginning to worry that Colin, if unable to get through on the telephone from the desk, might come upstairs.

Rowland had continued speaking, she now realized, for some while. He had been speaking throughout this flurried reappraisal of the beginning of their conversation, and he was still speaking now. He had said, after the mention of intuition, something about a visit to Oxford, something about some don, and something about Tom. But now her need to say the right thing, the vital thing, was growing stronger and stronger. She could feel this message rising up from her heart, and the urgency of these words made them take on physical shape; they loomed larger and larger in her mind; they were large, the size of a hoarding, as tall as the Hollywood sign.

' . . . Tom's opinion,' she heard.

'I have missed you, Rowland,' said her tongue.

Lindsay clamped her hand over her mouth. She realized that this blurted remark had gone unanswered. She was leaning to silence, a silence that went on too long.

Lindsay—'

He said her name with a sudden lift to his voice, and Lindsay, intent on retrieval, intent on glossing over that admission, an admission that had phrased itself in the long way, so that it sounded defensive, began babbling again.

When she said *missed*, she continued, revving up into overdrive, what Rowland must remember was how inspiring the collections could be, and how good it always was to have a friend to unwind with at the end of a hard day. Preferably someone with little interest in fashion, such as Rowland himself . . . or, for instance, his friend Colin Lascelles.

Her eye fell on those photographs of Shute Farm, and she rushed on. Luckily for her, she continued, Colin had been a great help in this respect. They'd taken to meeting here in the bar after work . . . Oh, and last night, he'd taken her out for the most delicious dinner. Then he had shown her the Conrad, that extraordinary building, and introduced her to his aunt . . .

This speech, a long one, was not interrupted once by Rowland; it was received in absolute silence, until the moment when she mentioned Colin's aunt. Then he did interrupt, and his next question was not warmly asked. 'Colin introduced you to Emily?'

'Yes, yes, yes,' Lindsay said, accelerating again, and finding that Rowland's *froideur*, his inexplicable *froideur*, was making her more nervous. 'Yes, yes,' she said; then Colin had brought her back to the Pierre and had produced these photographs.

This topic took Lindsay off on a very long explanation, involving her own future plans, her economic strategies, and finally the uncanny perfection of this house near Oxford called Shute Farm.

'Could I just get something clear?' Rowland said, his tone now arctic, interrupting this encomium as Lindsay began to rhapsodize about roses around doors. 'You're planning on moving out of London, is that correct?'

'Yes, yes. Didn't I mention that was my plan?'

'No.' There was a pause. 'You did not.'

This time his tone was so forbidding, Lindsay did not dare to speak, let alone babble.

'Shute Farm. Twenty miles from Oxford. Well, well.'

'It's the location that makes it so perfect, Rowland,' Lindsay said, confused and a little hurt that Rowland seemed displeased at her good fortune. 'It will mean I can see Tom from time to time – but it's not right on his doorstep, so he won't feel cramped. And then, it's so pretty, Rowland. It's in the middle of fields, no neighbours . . .'

'Are you sure about that?'

'There's no other cottages in the picture, Rowland, just fields. So there'll be nothing and no-one to distract me . . .'

'Possibly.' He sounded unconvinced. 'It's certainly in a very beautiful part of the country.'

'Oh, you mean you know it, Rowland? From when you were at Oxford?'

'Yes, I used to drive out that way often. I know it well. And who did you say this place belongs to?'

Colin's father knows? I see. And it's available? The rent is low?'

'I think so. Colin's coming over to explain all the details today. He'll be here any minute, in fact—'

'Ah. Well, don't let me detain you.'

'No, no. He's coming up here – I know he'd love a word with you.'

'Somehow I doubt that. And I don't have time.'

'It really is the most beautiful house, Rowland. It's everything I dreamed about,' Lindsay said, still puzzled by his critical tone. 'If it does work out, will you come

and see it? I'd like that. You could come over one day for a meal with Colin . . .'

'With Colin? That should prove diverting, to say the least.'

'Rowland, is something wrong? I don't understand. You sound so – I expect I'm making you late for your meeting.'

'Lateness is certainly on my mind.'

'I don't want you to miss it, Rowland—'

'I have a feeling I've already missed it.'

'Rowland, you could sound a bit more encouraging, you know.' Lindsay hesitated, disappointment welling inside her. 'I thought you'd be pleased. It was so kind of Colin to help. He's obviously gone to a lot of trouble . . .'

'Oh, I agree.'

'He is your friend, Rowland. I was – well, I was a bit worried about the money side of things, and . . .'

'With good cause.'

'I'm sorry?' Lindsay felt a sudden distress. 'Rowland, don't be disparaging. I know I haven't planned all of this as well as I might have done – and that book contract isn't marvellous, but I am trying to do my best . . .'

'No, the contract isn't marvellous, and any fool could have told you not to sign it. I suppose that one of these days you'll learn to stand up for yourself on the money front. I certainly hope so, because that publisher has taken you for a ride.'

'Rowland—'

'You do realize, do you, that there's no way you can live on that kind of advance? It's going to take you two years, probably three, to write this damn book, and that advance won't pay your electricity bills . . .'

'Yes it will. Wait a moment, Rowland—' Lindsay, feeling her temper begin to rise, struggled to control it. *Dulcet* she reminded herself. 'I don't think you can have been listening,' she continued. 'I told you – it v

'Something you need to discuss with Tom?' Lindsay frowned. 'Well, of course, I know he'd be delighted to see you. Katya would too.'

'I'd rather Katya wasn't there actually. I wanted to talk to Tom alone.'

There was a silence; Rowland had spoken with emphasis. Lindsay felt a flicker of unease.

'You don't want Katya to be there?' She hesitated, feeling suddenly afraid. 'I don't understand. Rowland, does this concern Katya in some way?'

'You could put it like that. I want to make Tom understand that—'

'Tom loves Katya.' Lindsay spoke in a flat voice, panic rising. 'He adores her. They've been together nearly three years. She's the fixed point of his life, Rowland . . .'

'Precisely. I know that. Which is why—'

'Oh God. She wrote to you, didn't she? You told me and I thought no more about it.' Lindsay's voice became unsteady. 'I can't believe this. Rowland — wait . . .'

In a second, a score of past incidents flashed before her eyes. She saw all those occasions when Katya glanced at Rowland as she made some provocative remark; all the occasions when Katya had tried to monopolize Rowland in argument; all the occasions . . . she had watched Katya mask attraction with antagonism, and had done nothing, assuming that Katya's fascination with Rowland was harmless, that it would vanish eventually of its own accord.

'So what's happened?' she heard herself say. 'Has she written to you again? Have you seen her? Rowland — you haven't encouraged her, surely? She's nineteen years old. She's young enough to be your daughter—'

'I'm aware of Katya's age.' Rowland's voice had become curt. 'Lindsay, will you listen to me? For the whole of this past week I've — damn it, this is impossible on the telephone . . .'

 Lindsay could hear the emotion

in his voice then, and the urgency; it spoke volumes and it made her afraid.

'Oh, I can't believe this, I *can't*,' she burst out. 'Rowland, how can you even *consider* such a thing? How far has this gone? You realize what this will do to Tom, do you? He admires you so much – he looks up to you. Rowland, if you've been anywhere near Katya, if you've flirted with her, I'll never forgive you. For God's sake aren't there enough obliging women in London? She's Tom's *girlfriend*. Don't you *dare* go running to my son with that kind of problem . . .'

'Have you finished?'

'No, I damn well haven't. What are you proposing to say to him, Rowland?'

'I'm not proposing to say anything now. I'll forget the entire fucking idea. Jesus Christ, I don't believe this . . . I'm going to hang up—'

'No, you won't. You'll explain and explain now. What's happened? It's something serious, I can tell from your voice . . .'

'*Nothing's* happened. You expect me to answer that kind of accusation? You think I'm that kind of man? What in God's name has got into you?'

'Yes, I damn well do expect you to answer. I can hear it – you're hiding something. You said you had to talk to Tom alone. You said it concerned Katya . . .'

'Damn it, I didn't say that. Do you *never* listen? Fine. Just for the record, Lindsay, and to set your mind at rest, I'll spell it out to you. No, I wouldn't set out to seduce or encourage a nineteen-year-old girl who happens to live with a young man I like and admire. No, I wouldn't encourage her in any way if I had the slightest suspicion that she was interested in me. And, finally, *finally*, Lindsay, if such a situation arose, the very last thing I'd do is run with the problem to a volatile boy half my age.' He paused. 'I'd have thought you might have known that. The fact that you clearly don't hurt

me more than I can say.' He paused again. 'In fact, makes me so fucking angry, I don't even know why I'm continuing this conversation, so—'

'Wait. Don't hang up. Rowland, listen—' Lindsay hesitated, feeling a rising tide of shame and distress. 'I'm sorry. I'm sorry if I jumped to the wrong conclusion but you sounded – I still don't understand. Why did you want to see Tom?'

'I told you. I won't be making that visit now. It's not really your concern – but Tom's reading History, and that was history I wanted his opinion on; ancient history that. As to how you think I sounded – no doubt it's the strain of having a conversation with you. For what it's worth, Lindsay, you're one of the stupidest women I've ever known. You leap to conclusions; you don't listen half the time; you're so wrapped up in your own plans and your own activities, that you never notice what other people are thinking or saying, let alone feeling . . .'

'Wait – Rowland. That's not true—'

'I'd like to know, before I ring off, just what possible justification you think you have for what you've just said to me. In all the time you've known me, have I ever behaved in that way?'

'No. Maybe not . . .'

Lindsay hesitated. 'But if we're going to be honest, you have a certain reputation, Rowland, you know.'

'Do I? I see.' He gave a sigh. 'And you believe the gossip you hear. Well, that's good to know. So much for *your* loyalty, Lindsay.'

'That's not fair either,' Lindsay said, fighting tears. 'I've always – Rowland, please, I've said I'm sorry. I was upset and I was confused. You'd been so harsh about all my plans. You sounded so strange . . .'

'I may have sounded harsh, but what I said was accurate.'

'You talk *down* to me, Rowland. You do it all the time. I don't understand why you do that . . .'

Lindsay paused, fighting to steady her voice. She had begun to cry.

'You tell me I'm stupid and disloyal and incompetent, and I get to the stage where I can't think clearly any more . . .'

'You *never* think clearly, and your failures in that respect have nothing to do with me.'

'You see? You're doing it again. Why? I've tried to apologize. You've done it right from the start of this conversation. Everything I do is wrong. Why? My plans aren't that bad. Colin says—'

'I don't damn well want to *hear* what Colin has to say,' Rowland shouted, losing his temper as suddenly as she had done. 'Learn to stand on your own two feet for once in your life . . .'

'What?' Lindsay had begun to tremble with misery and anger. 'How can you say that? What do you think I was doing when I spent twenty years bringing up my son on my own? What do you think I'm trying to do *now*, Rowland? Don't you shout at me. Anyone would think you were my father the way you talk to me. Do this, don't do that . . .'

'Your father? Thanks. I can imagine only one worse fate than being your father. I'm going. I've had more than enough of this conversation. I have better things to do with my time . . .'

'I agree. Just fuck off, Rowland. I'm sick of your preaching. Don't talk to me about not listening to other people, or not noticing what they're feeling. You do it the whole bloody time . . .'

'Oh, go to hell,' said Rowland, and slammed down the phone.

Twenty minutes after that, Lindsay was lying on her bed and Colin was lying beside her. Colin, whose perceptions of that morning's events were jagg . . . est, was not sure how he came to be there, but no

he knew it was the right, the only place. A trajectory begun in TriBeCa some four hours earlier had not completed its course; the laws of dynamics had determined that he had to be here, with Lindsay in his arms and nowhere else.

He had walked to the Pierre from the Conrad, as no one cab in New York seemed to be free; he had been soaked to the skin for the second time that day, but since Lindsay did not seem to mind that his clothes were wet, neither did he.

'Don't cry, Lindsay. Dear Lindsay, you mustn't cry. Come here,' Colin said, as he had already said several times before. He drew Lindsay closer into his arms, and she could weep against his wet shoulder. Every so often he produced another of the beautiful linen handkerchiefs that Thalia had mocked and dried Lindsay's eyes. Lindsay, who had poured out the whole story of Rowland's telephone call to him, would thank him and attempt to calm herself and then weep some more.

'I am so bloody miserable,' she said now, in a indistinct voice, into damp Brooks Brothers cotton. 'I'm sorry about this, Colin. I'd quite like to die, but I may recover if I weep for the next week.'

'You can cry on my shoulder for the next *month*,' Colin said, feeling rapturously happy. 'For the next *year*.'

'He said such wounding things . . .' Lindsay continued, wiping her eyes. 'And the worst part of it is — they were all *true*, every one of them.'

'I know.' Colin sighed. 'There's always a vile accuracy about a dressing-down from Rowland. I've had a few. Was he cold? Something happens to his voice, have you noticed? It's not just *what* he says, it's the *way* he says it. It makes one want to shrivel up and die.'

'I was horrible back.' Lindsay made a moaning sound. 'I made all those awful accusations. I told him he had no reputation.'

'So he does. It's rather longer than your average arm.'

'I told him he was patronizing.'

'Quite right. He can be patronizing.'

'I told him he was pompous.'

'Oh dear.'

'I told him to fuck off, Colin . . .'

'Nothing wrong with that. I frequently do.'

'He was so scathing about that contract I'd signed.

Colin, he made me feel such a fool.'

'Well, it wasn't a *great* contract,' Colin said gently, 'but you'll manage, I'm sure.'

'I told him all about that lovely house you'd found and how excited I was. I thought he'd be pleased, but he wasn't. He just got colder and colder, and more and more sarcastic . . .'

Colin gave another sigh. He could imagine Rowland's reaction, since Rowland knew Shute Farm well, and Rowland did not take kindly to duplicity. He knew that, given Rowland's character, there would be consequences for himself. He could predict them precisely and he knew precisely how he intended to deal with them. On another occasion, the thought of facing Rowland's ire might have alarmed him; not now. Now he was here in Lindsay's arms, he felt he could have dealt with the devil himself.

He began to stroke Lindsay's hair and then her back – something he had been longing to do since she first burst into tears and he took her in his arms. Lindsay's hair, soft but resilient, smelled of rosemary. In her uppermost ear, she was wearing a small gold ear-ring, with a jade teardrop. Colin found he wanted to kiss her hair, and her ear, which was small and delicate.

Lindsay tensed as he began to stroke her; then, soothed by the stroking, she relaxed. 'Shall I tell you the worst thing he said?' She turned her head to look at Colin, her eyes brimming with tears. 'It hurt me so much. He said I was childish. He said I acted like a child

— and I thought that wasn't fair. I wasn't childish. I was bringing up Tom — and I thought Rowland would have known that.'

More tears spilled down her cheeks and Colin resisted the impulse to kiss them away. 'But he's right,' she went on. 'It hurts to admit it, but he's *right*. I don't understand why it is — I'm not childish when I work. I can go to my department, do my work, and do it well. I feel confident then — but outside of that . . . I just mess everything up. I try and reorganize my life, and Rowland's right, I've done it in the stupidest way. I swear I'll never have that impulse again, and then I do. I lose my temper, just *that*; I sign bad contracts; I run away from things; I make the simplest decisions sometimes—'

'Give me an example. Tell me a decision you never make.'

'Well, Thanksgiving, for instance; that ought to be easy enough. I was going to Washington, but that turned out unlikely now. I could stay in New York. I did think of going back to England. I change my mind five times a day . . .'

'That's easily settled. Stay in New York and spend Thanksgiving with me. I'd like that.'

'Do you mean that?' She turned to look at him. 'I think you do. All right, that would be nice. Thank you, Colin.'

'Anything else I can sort out for you?'

'Oh, just my life. Just my life. Just my life.' Lincoln looked up from his shoulder and gave him a wan smile.

'Listen . . .' Colin dried the last tears, kissed her forehead and positioned her so that she was now comfortably cradled in his arms. 'You don't want to let what Rowland says too much to heart. He's always got that fiendish temper; he won't have meant all he said. He can be gentle and understanding as well, you know.'

'I know that. And he did mean it, I could tell.'

'If it's any consolation, I'm an equally hopeless case.'

– much worse, in fact. Rowland reminds me of that from time to time, and if I'm in a bad mood, I remind him of the mistakes *he's* made; there are plenty of them. We do all make them, Lindsay – you're not alone.'

He paused. 'Shall I tell you how I started messing up my life? It was when my brother died. I had an elder brother, Edward, whom I loved very much. Edward was – well, he was everything I wasn't, everything I'd have liked to be. He was brilliant at school – he took a First at Oxford – he was effortlessly clever, very funny, and very kind. I adored him – everyone did. And my father – my father worshipped him.' He hesitated, then gave a sigh. 'My father's a good man – he was always gentle and encouraging to me as I limped along behind Edward, but I always knew it was Edward he loved the most.' He looked down at Lindsay. 'When you love someone, when you care more about that person than anyone else on earth, it can't be hidden, don't you think? It shows in the eyes.'

'Maybe.' Lindsay, who had stopped crying, took his hand in hers. 'Go on, Colin.'

'Well, Edward was killed in a car crash, just before I went up to Oxford. I can't really talk about this, even now, but what it did to my father was terrible; he aged overnight. It broke him inside. You'd never know that if you met him, because he's very proud, for one thing, and very much old school in his views. Men should never show emotion, you know.'

'I do.'

'I was never like that – which was one of the problems – but after Edward died, I made myself this vow: I'd become Edward; I'd give my father back the son he'd lost . . . I knew it would be hard, but I told myself that if I worked at it every day, if I threw myself into my studies at Oxford, I might get some of the way . . . And you know what happened?' He gave her a sad smile. 'All those fine resolutions – they lasted about five weeks.'

Then, when I saw it wasn't working, I went to the opposite extreme: I stopped doing any work at all, never went to lectures, I hung around with a stupid crowd of people I didn't even like, and I drank. I drank all the time. I was drunk by ten o'clock in the morning and I made sure I stayed drunk all day.' He shrugged. 'They'd have thrown me out, in due course. They're tolerant at Oxford, amazingly so. They knew the circumstances and perhaps they made allowances, I don't know. But I was going out of my way to get sent down and they'd have obliged me in the end. Then I met Rowland—'

'And it was Rowland who helped you?'

'Yes.' Colin made a face. 'In a very grim sort of way. No sympathy; no indulgences, but he made me see — was *my* choice: sink or swim. I tried very hard to shift the responsibility onto his shoulders, of course . . .' He gave Lindsay a half-amused glance. 'And I still do from time to time. But he wasn't having that, so, gradually, I learned. I came to admire him. He could make me laugh — he could be dry, even then. He was a hard taskmaster but I wanted his approval so I reformed, in the end.' He glanced towards Lindsay.

'I know what you're thinking: Rowland's my replacement brother — it's obvious, I know. And Rowland's never pointed that out to me, which is his supreme compliment, I always feel. He never rubs in the fact that I can't get through life without a brother figure, without a prop of some kind . . .'

'Colin, *everyone* needs props sometimes.' Feeling a rush of affection for him, Lindsay sat up and drew Colin to face her. 'Even Rowland does sometimes, I expect, and I don't believe that Rowland thinks you use him as a crutch. Besides, who's propping me up now, and doing it very well? You underestimate yourself, Colin, and you put yourself down, you know.'

She looked directly into his eyes as she said this; he

expression was so gentle, and so filled with conviction, that Colin was almost overcome. The desire to kiss her intensified.

'Perhaps we're both guilty of that,' he said, drawing her down beside him again. 'I feel very much as you do. I'm reasonably good at my job, but outside of that, I feel muddled and ineffectual most of the time. I over-react, or I fail to react, or I react much too late, or too soon . . .' He took her hand in his. 'I always feel as if – oh, I don't know – as if I'm running for the last bus, and just as I draw close enough to jump on board, it pulls away – and all the passengers laugh.' He paused. 'Even if I caught it, it would probably turn out to be the wrong bus, going in the wrong direction. Everyone else always seems to know which bus to catch, and when it runs. Half the time, I can't even read the fucking timetable.' He smiled.

Lindsay was moved by the way he spoke. She turned towards him, inside the circle of his arms.

'Why do you think that?' she said. 'I'm sure it isn't true. You could catch any bus you wanted, Colin, any time. You're funny and clever and kind . . .'

'So are you.' Colin's voice became unsteady. 'You're all those things and more. You have beautiful eyes and beautiful hair, and a beautiful voice. If it's any consolation, which it probably isn't, I watched you with Tom in Oxford. I couldn't help watching you, because I couldn't take my eyes off you. I didn't think you were childish, not remotely so. I could see you were sad about something. I think now – well, I think that in some ways you are childlike, which is a very different thing, and a good thing. I also think you're very womanly. I can't look at you without . . . You are – Lindsay, you make me . . .'

'Oh God,' said Lindsay, seeing what was about to happen next.

'Please keep still,' Colin said, with sudden firmness.

'I'm going to kiss you. Don't argue. Don't move. Stay still.'

To her own surprise, Lindsay obeyed him. He held her for a long while, tilting her face to his and touching her hair. Then, with great gentleness, he rested his head against hers. Lindsay closed her eyes tight. The kiss, gentle to begin with, became prolonged. It could easily escape her notice that, for a man who claimed to miss metaphorical buses, he kissed alarmingly well.

When this first kiss finally ended and Lindsay steadied her voice, she told him so. Colin smiled and kissed her again, and Lindsay discovered the taste of his mouth; she liked what he did with his mouth, and she also liked what he began to do with his hands. It was gentle, adept and very determined.

'You have the most beautiful breasts,' he said, undoing her blouse – something Lindsay discovered he was prepared to let him do without protest or delay.

'You are lovely,' he said, kissing each nipple. 'And I have wanted to do this ever since I first came into that room in Oxford and saw you. I may have been the mother of all hangovers, and my brain may not have been functioning too well, but the rest of my senses were.'

'Then?' Lindsay said, knowing she was flattered by this revelation, but excusing this as a weakness for a man of his sex.

'Then and since,' he replied. 'In the restaurant that night. At Emily's. When I had to leave you here that night. I find it very hard indeed to look at you and not think about making love to you. No doubt that's a bad habit. Oh, you're wearing stockings. I hoped you wouldn't be. Do you know what stockings do to a man?'

'I can *feel* what they're doing to a man,' Lindsay said, catching that glint of amusement in his eyes. She was herself beginning to smile, then stopping, hesitating, then touching him.

His response was immediate: a sharp intake of breath, an involuntary leaping of his flesh against her hand. He clasped her against him, and it was perhaps then that she decided. The 'yes' came into her mind when she saw physical need, saw his desire and her own power to gauge it, and realized that she could give pleasure as well as receive it. It had been too long, she thought, since she had last experienced a simplicity of that kind. 'Oh God, what am I doing?' she said, with a smile, reaching for his shirt buttons.

'It looks to me as if you're removing my shirt,' Colin said. 'I'd like it very much if you removed the rest of my clothes as well.'

'Are you sure this is a good idea?' she continued, undoing his belt and the zip of his jeans. Colin guided her hand, at which point Lindsay, who had been in little doubt anyway, realized just how good an idea this was. 'Colin?' she said, some while later.

'Mmmm?'

'I think I'd better warn you - I'm out of practice at this.'

'I'm not.'

'So I see.'

There was a long silence, while Colin demonstrated the truth of his last statement. Lindsay discovered that she was losing her residual control.

'Colin,' she began again, in a somewhat shaken, husky voice, as he lifted his head from between her thighs, having given her revelatory pleasure. 'Yes?' he replied, in a distracted way, kissing her stomach, then her breasts, and moving so that Lindsay could close her hand round his cock.

'Colin - we could stop this now.'

'No, dear Lindsay, we could not.'

'Wait a minute. I have to ask you something. Do you like me, Colin?'

'Yes. This bit of you especially. This bit I love.'

'Listen, I like you too . . .'

'There?'

'Especially there. But – listen. I don't want to stop liking you, or you me, and sometimes sex has that effect.'

'If you imagine', Colin said, with great firmness, 'that I'm going to discuss that now, you must be mad. Now be quiet. Open your legs. Is that nice?'

'It's amazing. I—'

'Oh, bloody *hell*. I don't have any condoms.'

'I'm on the pill.' Lindsay kissed him. 'I don't have any sexually communicable diseases . . .'

'Neither do I.'

'In that case—'

'I agree.'

'Colin, as long as you understand – it's so long since I've done this that I'm practically a virgin. I'm practically a nun . . .'

'I find that an encouragement,' he said, with a lift of one diabolic eyebrow. 'Especially the nun.'

'As long as you're sure. I—'

Colin saw there was only one thing for it. He silenced her with a kiss; shortly afterwards, and as he had suspected might be the case, she began to demonstrate a response and a proficiency unlikely to be found in a nun; and although not silent, she stopped talking as well.

Some time later, Colin disentangled himself from her arms with the greatest reluctance. He went into the bathroom, closed the door and stared rapturously at the air. He turned on all the taps to drown the sound of his voice, and told the taps and the walls and the bath how much he loved Lindsay.

When he had done this several times, and felt he had got it out of his system, so there was no danger of his saying it to Lindsay herself – *festina lente*, after all – he returned to the bedroom. As soon as he saw Lindsay lying back against the pillows, her skin rosy and her hair damp from their exertions, he felt that since he had

scrambled his schedule anyway, and just performed an act he had intended not to risk attempting for at least two weeks, he might as well admit the truth.

He was about to do so, indeed it was hard for him to look at her and *not* do so, when he remembered those occasions in his past when such lack of caution had served him ill.

He began to walk about the room, and slowly a terrible uncertainty, a terrible post-coital misery settled about him. What if Lindsay never came to reciprocate his feelings? What if she were regretting their love-making right now? He began to see that it was possible, even probable, that Lindsay would never let him make love to her again. He groaned aloud.

'I need a cigarette,' he said. 'I need two. *Four*.'

'That's all right.' Lindsay smiled and stretched. 'You can give me one as well.'

'You don't smoke.'

'I need one now. I'm feeling overcome.'

Colin found 'overcome' encouraging. He lit two cigarettes and returned to the bed. Lindsay curled up like a cat in the crook of his arm. She puffed, coughed, and gave up. Colin stared hard at the wall opposite. Do not mention love, said a stern admonitory voice in his mind; don't use that word under any circumstances; no sneaking it in; play it cool.

'That wasn't very good,' Colin burst out. 'In fact, it was disastrous. It was an unmitigated disaster, from beginning to end.'

'Was it?' Lindsay smiled and curled closer. 'I thought it was wonderful. I enjoyed it. The beginning, and the middle, and the end.'

'You didn't come,' Colin said, in the tones of one approaching the scaffold, 'and I came too soon. Oh God, *God*.'

'I very nearly did,' Lindsay said, in a comfortable way. 'I was only about two millimetres off. And I didn't think

you came too soon; I think you came at exactly the right moment. One can't always synchronize, and it felt so good when you did.'

'It makes it worse if you're kind.'

'I'm not being kind, I'm telling you the truth. And it *was* the first time.'

'That's true.' Colin's demeanour brightened. He found he did not need the cigarette; in fact, he decided, he would never need one again. He abandoned it and took Lindsay in his arms. Her eyes dazzled him. Don't even *think* about saying it, said that voice in his mind.

'I expect it's me.' Lindsay sighed. 'I expect I was a disappointment.'

'You're mad.'

'I have stretch marks on my stomach; I expect they put you off. Tom's nearly twenty and I *still* have stretch marks.'

'Where?'

'There, and there, and there.'

Lindsay indicated some faint silvery lines. Colin began to kiss them. 'You're beautiful,' he said. 'I love your stretch marks. I love every single one of them . . .' But very, very careful, said the voice in his mind.

'I expect my rhythms weren't very good,' Lindsay went on in a doleful voice. 'I told you I was out of practice. You went into this amazing sort of tang sequence and I was still doing the waltz.'

'Oh, God, *God*. I wasn't giving you the right signals . . .'

'Oh God. I wasn't picking them up . . .'

There was a small silence. Colin stopped kissing the stretch marks and looked up. Lindsay smiled; he smiled. His diabolic eyebrows rose in two quizzical peaks. Lindsay kissed them. She kissed his marvellous hair. That now familiar warmth and amusement returned to Colin's eyes.

'You're teasing me,' he said. 'You're sending me u

'I most certainly am.'

'I love you when you do that,' Colin said. At which point the admonitory presence in his mind washed its hands of him and gave up in disgust.

Dalliance ensued. During the dalliance, Colin suggested that in view of Lindsay's comments on making love for the first time with a new partner, a second experiment might be wise. Lindsay agreed. After this, they slept in each other's arms very peacefully for a while; on waking, they discovered that Colin did not have to work that day, and Lindsay, who had been going to begin her Chanel research, could put it off with no problems at all.

They lay side by side, talking quietly and companionably. Lindsay, feeling at peace, realized that she was happier than she had been in a long, long while, and Colin experienced an absence of anxiety so unusual he decided it must be bliss. He told her of the long, strange and painful night he had spent, and she listened with a care and concern that belied the criticisms of Rowland McGuire. 'I'm proud of you. You slew the dragon,' she said, when Colin recounted his battle with that tape-recording machine, and Colin, who had not thought of it like that, felt comforted and hoped this was true.

'So I didn't sleep at all last night,' he explained, some while later. 'I had no sleep and then I walked about a thousand blocks in the rain. All I could think about was seeing you. I had to see you, and now I see why.'

He bent across and kissed her hair, then her mouth, which opened with an already sweet familiarity under his.

'Considering you hadn't slept and I'd been so miserable,' Lindsay said, 'it's astonishing the progress we've made, don't you think?'

'I do. One millimetre, that time?'

'Less. Half a millimetre at most. Very close indeed.'

'I thought so. We're beginning to know each other. think, next time . . .'

'Mmm. So do I.' She stretched. 'What shall we do now? It's afternoon. Colin, you must be longing to sleep properly . . .'

'I'm not. I feel astonishingly awake. We could order up some food from room service. Some champagne.'

'Oh, let's. And have it in bed?'

'Of course.'

'We could watch some stupid movie on television . . .'

'We could. I love watching television in the day; it always feels debauched. So we could watch a movie, or talk, or I could just lie here and look at your eyes . . .'

'You could tell me all about this lovely house you've found . . .'

'I'll do better than that. I'll take you there, after Thanksgiving. We could go back to England on the same flight. I'll have a little gap before filming starts. I could drive you down there. We could stay at an inn and sit by a fire, and I could make love to you all night . . .'

Lindsay sat up. 'Colin, did you know this was going to happen?'

'No, not today. I hoped - well, in due course. You know.'

'I didn't see it coming at all. Not until just before you kissed me.' She gave a small frown. 'At least, I don't think I did.' She hesitated. 'Colin, what I said to you before . . .'

'Not the best timing.'

'I know, I talk too much, and always at the wrong moment. I was nervous . . .' She paused. 'Colin, it can be a very bad idea to go to bed with someone you like. I learned that years ago. A friend becomes a lover; you lose the lover; you lose the friend. I wouldn't want that to happen to us.'

'It won't happen to us.'

'Can we promise each other that? We agree now: no

regrets ever, or complications? Just something that happened to make us both very, very happy at the time?’

She held out her hand to him. Colin bent over her palm, so she could not see his expression and kissed it.

‘Sure,’ he said. ‘It’s a deal.’

Colin finally left the Pierre at around ten-thirty that night. The third experiment had fulfilled their predictions, and as they both agreed, the fourth was a conclusive triumph. Colin walked along anonymous hotel corridors, missed the elevators, circled the Pierre several times, and eventually found himself in the lobby. He walked through it, cloaked in joy. He bumped into a tall thin young woman with very short blond hair, unseasonably dressed in a crop-top, pedal pushers and ballerina slippers. Some while after she had greeted him, he realized that this was Lindsay’s assistant, Pixie, who when last seen two days previously had had shoulder-length black hair.

He examined her, smiling. ‘Got it,’ he said finally. ‘Jean Seberg, in *Breathless*?’

‘Spot on.’ Pixie looked at him closely and raised one eyebrow. ‘You look happy,’ she said.

‘Pixie, I am happy. I am extraordinarily happy. Isn’t it the most wonderful world?’

Pixie looked at his dishevelled hair, dishevelled clothes and radiant expression. Aware that she had become invisible to him, she raised the other eyebrow, smiled, and kindly showed him to the exit door. Colin left the hotel and soon afterwards discovered he was back at the Conrad, though he had no recollection of any period of transit between the two. Emily, seeing at once that he was in no condition to understand the English language, kept her news to the minimum, despite the fact that she had been longing to impart it for most of the day.

'She's *in*,' she said. 'Natasha Lawrence is *in* been admitted to the Conrad, God help us against, and those four darned male simpletons for. This we will discuss further tomorrow, Colin, while, Thalia with an unpronounceable surname. You are to fly out tomorrow afternoon to Mor continue your work with that peculiar director there. Perhaps more importantly, and certainly urgently, your friend Rowland McGuire has called. 'He first called at ten-thirty this morning spoke to Frobisher in a somewhat heated way called on the hour, every hour since, and if mistaken, that will be him calling now. So take in your room, Colin, which you will find at the end of the corridor. And collect your wits, because I've spoken to him, and he does not sound intractable of moods.'

Colin did as he was bade. He found his own room. He found the telephone.

'Hello, Rowland,' he said. 'What a wonderful surprise. Perhaps you'd be good enough to explain to me the fuck you think you're doing?' Rowland said with great politeness. 'I'm now at home. It's four o'clock in the morning. In front of me is a postcard from New York glorious. Lindsay adorable. O brave new world, Love, Colin.' The style didn't surprise me. I was altogether surprised by the content, but now I'm confused. If Lindsay is so adorable, would you explain why you've been lying to her? You came to me for not giving you away this morning, while I was about it. Shute Farm? Owned by someone you know? Available at a miraculously low rent?'

'All true,' said Colin, gazing out of the window at the moon.

'Are you drunk?'

'Not on alcohol no.'

'All true? Then your interpretation of truth must be very different from mine. Maybe you'd like to explain why you failed to tell Lindsay the *exact* truth: to wit, that house is owned by your father and entailed to you, as it will be entailed to your sons, or – failing that – your cousin's sons. To all intents and purposes, Colin, you own it – along with Shute itself, God alone knows how many other tenant farms, cottages and houses, plus an obscene amount of Oxfordshire. I find it surprising that you neglected to mention these belongings of yours. Were you similarly reticent about the forty thousand acres in Scotland, and the umpteen million you inherited from the Lancaster clan? Colin, it was perfectly obvious that Lindsay knows none of this, and you, for some reason I cannot comprehend, are deceiving her by manoeuvring her into becoming your tenant at a knock-down rent. You're doing this, what's more, at a time in her life when she's especially vulnerable to assistance of that kind. Now I know your schemes, Colin, and I've seen them blow up in everyone's faces a thousand times. So I'm warning you, if you end up harming Lindsay or hurting her in any way . . .'

'I love her,' Colin said, in a beatific voice, still staring at the moon. 'I love her. I adore her. She's the most wonderful woman ever born.'

This checked Rowland for rather less long than Colin had hoped.

'Then this is worse than I thought,' he said, in a brusque way. 'You do *not* love her, Colin. You *fake* love the way other people catch colds.'

'No, I don't,' said Colin, in a robust way. 'I *use* love. I admit that, but I haven't done that for at least a few years. I love her. I love her with all my heart. I won't give up the very ground on which she walks.'

'Colin, you've known her less than two weeks.'

'That has nothing to do with it,' Colin replied with a wits returning, and a note of unmistakable conviction.

entering his voice. 'You can love someone just like *th*
He snapped his fingers. 'You meet them, you know
ou're going to love them, and the love starts to grow
and if you don't know that, Rowland, you're a great
deal stupider than I thought.'

Rowland hesitated. 'Very well,' he said. 'I concede
that can happen. It doesn't last.'

'This *is* going to last. I've just left her now. I've been
with her all day – and I'm so happy I can hardly
speak. She's loyal and good and candid and funny and
warm . . .'

'Colin, I wouldn't argue with any of that. I know her
too well; she's also scatty, impetuous and naïve. She has
a terrible temper, a nasty tongue and a marked inability
to *think*. She is, without a doubt, one of the most
impossible goddamned irritating women I've ever
known . . .'

'You see? You're fond of her too!' Colin proclaimed
on a note of triumph. 'I can hear it in your voice.
She's a *paragon*. And you know the best thing of
Rowland? She likes *me*. She can see my faults and she
still likes me. She doesn't know about the money
Shute – she likes me for *myself*. For the first time in
my life I have no doubts about that – in fact, if she knew
about the money, I'm afraid she might like me less.
I want her to know me, *really* know me, before she falls
out. I want her to see Shute for the first time, and then
now it's mine, so she can just love it for itself, and then
I want her to marry me. I'm going to marry her.
Rowland, and if you come between her and me, I
fucking well kill you, because she is the best thing that
ever happened to me. Apart from you, she's the only
good thing, the one incontestably good thing that has
happened to me since Edward died.'

There was a long silence then. In London, knowing
Colin would never mention his brother unless
passionately meant what he said, Rowland bowed low

head in his hands. In New York, Colin thought of Lindsay in his arms and felt blessed.

'I'm going to marry her, Rowland, and I'm going to marry her within six months,' he continued, in a quieter voice. 'I'm going to ask her the very second I think she might accept, and I damn near asked her an hour ago – so you can draw your own conclusions from that.'

'In that case,' Rowland said, after a pained hesitation, 'I shall say nothing to Lindsay about Shute. I hope you know you can rely on that. But I also hope you know what you're doing, because Lindsay would be very easy indeed to hurt—'

'As you should know,' replied Colin, in a flash, 'considering how you hurt her today. You reduced her to tears—'

'I did what?'

'You made her cry, and you're not going to do it again. She was in an utterly miserable state – and I'm not surprised. You destroy every bit of confidence she has. She's trying to make a new start in life, and what do you do? You roll in like a fucking Centurion tank, and you tell her she's naïve and childish, and only a fool would have signed that book contract. Not everyone has your fucking unshakeable self-confidence, Rowland. Why don't you *think*?'

'I made her cry?' Rowland sounded both bewildered and shocked. 'That's the last thing on God's earth I'd have wanted to do. I thought – we argue, Lindsay and I. We're always having some fight. I lose my temper, she loses hers, and then the next day—'

'Well, don't lose your temper with her!' Colin cried. 'I love her. I won't have you talking to her like that. I saw you do it in Oxford, and I wanted to punch you then. Lindsay's right – anyone would think you were her father, the way you talk to her . . .'

Rowland, who had begun to speak, was brought up short.

'Her father. I see. Were there any details of my private conversation with Lindsay that weren't reported back?'

'No, since you ask. She told me the whole miserable story from beginning to end. She tried to hide it, when I first arrived, but I *knew* there was something wrong, and then she just broke down. She started crying and she couldn't stop. I put my arms around her, and—' He broke off. 'And, anyway, I calmed her down, eventually. I explained you didn't *really* despise her. I told her how you're always bawling me out. We agreed in the end that you were right rather too often, but you weren't such a bad sort and we both quite liked you. None of which means that you shouldn't be ashamed of yourself.'

'I'm certainly ashamed to have made her cry. Perhaps you'd be good enough to tell her that,' Rowland said curtly. 'Meanwhile, if there's anything worse than the thought of the two of you discussing my defects in that particular cosy, nauseating way, I don't know what it is, so—'

'Oh, we forgot about you after a bit,' Colin said, in a cheerful, consoling tone. 'We never mentioned you again, funnily enough . . .'

'I'm hanging up, Colin.'

'Wait, wait, wait. Rowland – just one question.'

'What?'

'Will you be my best man, Rowland?'

Rowland considered this question for what seemed to Colin an unnecessarily long time.

'No,' he said eventually, his tone altering. 'No. I'm very fond of you, Colin, but I don't think I will. Good-night.'

TWO LETTERS AND FOUR FAXES

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XII

Throughout the following week, the telephone lines between Lindsay at the Pierre, and Colin, staying at Tomas Court's ranch in Montana, were kept very busy. It was a week of *correspondences*, and in more than one sense, Lindsay was later to decide. During it, fax lines, the international mail, and in one case a courier service, were kept busy as well.

The first missive, its formality of tone perhaps explained by the fact that it was the last of six drafts he had written, came in the form of a letter from Rowland M-C-

your pardon – how stilted that sounds! Lindsay, I'm so sorry and so sad to have caused you pain.

The conversation with Colin has made me realize that I have to be very careful how I express myself. I am not finding it easy to write this, and I want to be sure I avoid ambiguities, so will you forgive me for any awkwardnesses here? Everything I say, however clumsily expressed, is written from the heart.

I don't want to make excuses for myself, but I do want you to know that almost everything I said to you yesterday stemmed from my anxiety on your behalf. Lindsay, I look on you as a close and dear friend, for whom I feel an unwavering concern. I want you to find happiness and, yes, fulfilment in everything you do. That is why I question and argue as I do. I now realize just how badly I put my arguments yesterday. You were right to resent the way I spoke, but I would like you to understand that I don't mean to interfere, or snipe from the sidelines. I just can't bear to think that, as a result of all these recent changes and uprootings, you might experience difficulties, hardship, or unhappiness of any kind.

Colin has made me see how inept I am at conveying that concern to you. I'm grateful to him for that. Talking to him was a chastening experience; he made me see – well, many things for which I feel the deepest regret.

He also made me see that I've made one great error, an error I want to correct. I see I've always been quick to criticize, and that I have never told you how much I like, respect, value and admire you. So I say it now – without reservations. I hope you will believe that.

We have worked so closely together, and seen one another so often, that I realize I have assumed, in my usual arrogant way, that you knew this. I've assumed you would understand the unspoken, and I see now just how mistaken that was. Colin said you felt I

despised you – Lindsay, nothing could be further from the truth. I feel for you the very warmest admiration and regard; I rely on your friendship to a far greater degree than you perhaps realize; but then, I trust you completely – and I'm not good at trusting; I trust very few people indeed. I feel the deepest affection for you, Lindsay, even when I am insulting you, even when I have lost my temper, and especially when you are being, as you often are, one of the most provoking, most impossible women I've ever known.

You have great generosity of heart, Lindsay, and despite what I said yesterday, when I was angry for a hundred other reasons that need not worry you, I realize that your intuition and instincts are much sharper than mine. Yes, you jump to conclusions, but they are often the correct ones, whereas I am often too slow to acknowledge a truth, and try to argue it away. Something very obvious can be staring me in the face, and yet I refuse to see it until it is too late and an opportunity has gone. I don't know why I do that: obstinacy, perhaps, or I could blame caution. I think I sometimes fail to act for fear of mistaking the circumstances, or for fear of causing harm.

Well, I won't dwell on these very male defects, and I know I can rely on you to mock them. The point is, I accused you yesterday of acting first and thinking afterwards. I now see that's not always a vice, and can be a virtue. It is a virtue you possess – to act on the impulses of the heart – and I wish it were more often my own.

There are many other things I would have liked to say to you, but now is not the moment; besides, this letter is already too long. So, will you forgive what I said yesterday? There will be no more lectures; I give you my word.

I wish you happiness, joy and success with your book, with your new life, and perhaps with your new

home. In respect of property, Colin is a very good guide and advisor – far better than I could ever be. You can be confident that any proposals he makes are made with your best interests at heart. Colin can be as exasperating as you can be – and as I know you can be – but he is a good and utterly trustworthy man.

If you do go to live at Shute Farm, I hope it will fulfil all the dreams you spoke of – I'm sure it will. Meanwhile, I'm not certain when you are returning to London – perhaps after Thanksgiving? Perhaps when you return we could all three of us meet. I like to see you and try to begin making amends.

I can't stop thinking about your tears. I wish to God this had never happened. I realize that now I've said only a few of the things I wanted to say, and now I've said them ill. Lindsay, I trust to your generous heart to read between the lines and see the degree of regret I feel.

Damn! More time has gone by. I'm not writing coherently as I'd hoped, and I've now discovered it's almost impossible to courier a letter to New York over a weekend. I've finally found a firm that will do this, so my letter can go off today and reach you tomorrow, Sunday morning.

I shall think of you reading it. I'll listen to it, you'll no doubt, and justly, heap on me compliments. I promise you, over this distance of three thousand miles.

Please don't reply to this letter. I don't want to reply, and it's better to let it stand as my writing? I'm not feeling as calm as I should. I expect my punctuation leaves much to be desired.

My love – best and warmest
I hope I can still sign myself as
Rowland McGuire.

This letter, which Lindsay received without curses and with tears, arrived at the Pierre on Sunday afternoon. On the tenth reading, she still found herself puzzled by that reference of Rowland's to his punctuation. Rowland's punctuation was meticulous down to the last semicolon; in which respect, she thought, it was in singular contrast to her own letter to him, which had crossed with this one, and which she had posted express the previous day.

Dear Rowland,

I am in one of my *states*. I can't sleep, and I've been pacing up and down the room in the stupidest way. It's the middle of the night, and I can still hear myself shouting down the phone at you like some demented fishwife. Oh dear!

Listen – I'm just going to scribble this very fast and then rush out and catch the first post. Rowland, I'm so sorry I said all those horrible things to you. I want you to know – everything you accused me of was true. I see now that I've been a total fool about that bloody book contract. I think I knew that publisher man was a complete shit really, but I sort of buried the idea and hoped I was wrong. You're right about the money too – what's the matter with me? I always *intend* to get tough on the money front and then I never do. I think it's that I secretly despise money, so talking about it, let alone angling for more, always seems so *low*. So I'm always v. dignified, get screwed and end up living on vegetables for the next ten years.

But you don't have to worry, *truly*. I have some money saved, and I think Shute Farm may work out – in which case, I shall be able to afford bread and jam, if not blinis and caviar. I'll be so tucked away too, that I'll have no distractions – no movie theatres or friends, so I expect I'll write the

passed time out of sheer boredom and nothing
to do . . .

Well I'm putting off the serious thing, Rowan
when I think of what I said about Oxford and
and Katya, I want to die. What's wrong with my life
Whenever I talk to you, especially on the phone
into this stupid flustered state - it's like listen
fifteen radio stations simultaneously. Then I turn
on one of them and it's always the wrong one.

Rowland, I'm so ashamed I said those things
yesterday you were so hurt and furious. I just got
blind panic if I think anything could harm To
If I'd paused for two and a half seconds, I'd
known you would never act foolishly, because
always think everything through too carefully
there's no way you'd commit a dishonourable
act, but it, that no-one seems to use the
'honour' any more? I think honour is important
I think you're the most honourable man I've
known. Yes, I know you can lie to get your way
seen you do it at work a thousand times. And
so well - flagrantly and coolly. I wish I could do
I'm a lousy liar - well, sometimes I am. May
all the time. But I know you would never lie
anything important. I think of you as a man of
an honourable man of truth, so there! That's
want you to know that yesterday I said the
opposite of what I meant, as usual. I didn't
any of those terrible insults I hurled at you. To
is, I'm always grateful to you for your co-
your kindness and your strength. And your w
Rowland. It was great of you, yesterday, when
my children was in danger to be distressed abo
standing opposite when I kissed your sweetest
daughter of you. Thank you for that.

Anyway, the night with you tonight was
so good. It was so good to be with you. Thank

I've decided to stay on here until then; I have some Chanel research to do - I'm looking forward to becoming an archive addict. Quiet, dedicated and *nun-like* - and Colin is going to be here, so it seems quite a good idea.

Colin came here yesterday, after you telephoned; he was understanding, gentle and kind. You have nice friends, Rowland. He told me all about his brother and how you helped him at Oxford. He is very loyal and devoted to you, and so am I.

He's going to take me to see Shute Farm when we get back to England. I'm praying it will work out. I'm praying I'll cope if it does - I've never lived in the country. If you've forgiven me, I hope you'll come and see me there - you could teach me some useful rustic things: how to chop logs, how to light a fire.

Shall I buy some chickens? Or ducks? There's a stream. Oh, Rowland. I feel excited and afraid all at once. Since yesterday, so much has happened - and one day I'd like to tell you about it, but not now.

Are you in your lovely sitting-room as you read this? Are you frowning or smiling? I wonder, are those shutters I admire so much open or closed?

You've been a good friend to me, Rowland. The very best, kindest and most loyal of friends. I wish I said that yesterday, but since I didn't I'll say it now.

God, what horrible handwriting I have! Can you make out any of this? I hope you can at least see the important bits and read the important words.

I send you my thanks for all your very warm and your unfathomable but accurate insight into the nature of character. I send you my appreciation for your love and best wishes. Demand 1/6 per page for the manuscript available at the Pierre and I am sure you will find The smudges everywhere are a dear friend. Rowland

Christmas sweater in a very sober way. When you next see me, you'll find I'm a reformed character.

Lindsay.

Something went wrong with the US Mail Express system, or possibly there were problems at the UK end. Lindsay's letter did not arrive in London until four days had passed; then, since Lindsay did indeed have horrible and illegible, handwriting, especially when writing numbers, so that all her sevens looked like ones, the letter was delivered to Rowland's neighbour at number eleven in his terrace, and not to his house at number seventeen. The neighbour was away; he finally dropped the letter through Rowland's door late at night on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving.

Rowland found it on the mat early the following morning, as he was leaving for work. He read it only once on that occasion, but he read it with great care. He returned inside, called his secretary and various colleagues, cancelled all his appointments for the next three days, gave his deputy editor instructions, and then left for Oxford before nine.

Meanwhile, Colin Lascelles was finding the telephone an inadequate instrument to express himself.

Saturday. Montana.

Dearest Lindsay,

Have just spoken to you. Am going to bed. The sky here is amazing - I've never seen so many incredibly brilliant stars. I miss you terribly. I think I said that on the phone, but I'll say it again. I could throttle Tomas for dragging me out here, but I do feel sorry for him; he looks desperately ill. I'm going to fax this to the Pierre, so I can't say what I want to say. Imagine asterisks and all they imply. Can you understand Latin? I need to know immediately. You can fax me

at the above number and I wish you would because I feel totally sick at heart and soul. I send you love and *trois mille bises*.

Colin.

Tuesday. Montana.

Darling Lindsay,

Talking to you on the telephone is the only thing that's keeping me sane. When we talk, I feel as if I'm with you, holding you in my arms (and if you're the desk clerk at the Pierre reading this fax, FUCK OFF. This is private, you understand?) I've never known it to be so easy to talk to someone as it is to you. Do you feel that, darling? You've made such a difference to me in such a short time. I feel I can do *anything*: climb a mountain; fly.

I got up very early this morning – I couldn't sleep anyway for missing you. I borrowed one of Tomas's horses and went for a ride. The landscape is spectacular. I could see the peaks of Glacier National Park in the distance. Watched the sun rise and thought of you.

Tomas now much better and visibly stronger. There's umpteen production people here during the day, but they piss off in the evenings to some hotel, thank God, so apart from the odd bodyguard and staff, it's then just Tomas and Thalia and me.

He and I had a long talk yesterday, after Thalia had gone to bed. I forgot to tell you about this. He's a very interesting man – proud. I feel for him. I think he's in agony about – better use initials – NL. And about her move to Emily's building. I heard from Emily this evening, and apparently, NL must have had everything organized, and ready to roll, because the decorators are in there already. According to the Emily bush telegraph, always reliable, the whole

Christmas sweater in a very sober way. When you next see me, you'll find I'm a reformed character.

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thing will be finished by the end of this week. Yet she *can't* have known they'd admit her and the odds were against – most mysterious! NL apparently very thick with Biff already, which was predictable. H. Foxe singing her praises as well, which annoys Emily no end. NL *not* popular with Giancarlo and the other porters though, I hear. Trouble of various kinds, I gather – constant hassle from some anonymous caller – in view of what I told you, worrying, eh?

Listen, darling, we must talk tomorrow about Thanksgiving and all our other plans. I always mean to on the phone, but my mind goes into a whirl the second I hear your voice, and besides, we have other things to talk about then.

Is your friend Genevieve still coming up from Washington with her husband for Thanksgiving? When shall we fly back to England? I can't wait to show you Shute Farm. Isn't it great about the rent? I gather they want a tenant who *loves* the place – money isn't the issue. Money should never be the issue, I say, don't you agree?

Darling Lindsay, I'm very glad you can't read Latin. I'm afraid I had it rather dinned into me at school. Vivamus, dear Lindsay, atque amemus – soles occidere et redire possunt, nobis, cum semel occidit brevis lux, nox est perpetua una dormienda . . . Incidentally, you know that little thing you do that I mentioned (desk clerk at the Pierre, get LOST) the thing you do when I – you remember? Well, I'm thinking about it now. Effect immediate – and wasted alas; most frustrating. I send love, darling Lindsay. Take care of yourself. I hope the research goes well. Gabrielle Chanel sounds odd. Why didn't she marry the Duke of Westminster? I think of you in the archive place, darling. If I were with you there, we could do some very interesting research . . . Will call usual time

tomorrow. You can read my writing, I hope? Darling,
I kiss all your asterisks.

Colin.

Wednesday. The Pierre.

Dearest Colin,

The desk clerks here are giving me very peculiar looks. I wonder why? It's a great boost to my confidence – I'm perfecting a sultry slink for their benefit. This cheers me up when I get back from work. All day today in the Abbott Levy archive at MOMA. Wearying. Escaped finally, and came back feeling a bit low for some reason – having to concentrate, I expect. Then Emily kindly called and asked me round for a drink. We had great fun – I think I'm now getting used to her. I certainly like her a lot. I heard all the latest news about Biff, H. Foxe et al. (Ah, I find I do know some Latin after all.) I'll regale you with it when you call.

Emily told me the whole story of Anne Conrad and the two brothers. Heavens! It terrified me. No wonder she still haunts the place. The elevator was out of order when I left (overloaded by NL's decorators, and the first time it's broken down since 1948, Emily said), so I had to walk down that staircase *alone*.

I wished you'd been here when I returned. I miss you too, but there are so many things we need to talk about. Hurry up and come back to New York, I'm lonely and V jvfublh jrervxvffvat zl oernfgf evtug abj. You are a wonderful ybire, and I am very, very sbaq of you – but don't make me run too soon, dear Colin: I'm always slow off the starting blocks.

I'm faxing this, so you can work out the above. Also this: V jvfublh jrervafvqr zr, in fact, V jvfuguvf constantly. More research tomorrow. Not sure I'm cut out for this – archive libraries awfully *quiet* – no-one

allowed to *speak*. Good night, Colin. I can just see moon. Can you see it too? I send all best wishes love, kisses too.

Lindsay.

Friday. Montana.

My darling Lindsay,

Your letter came today. Darling, it made me happy. I've read it a thousand times. It's folded with that wicked fax you sent me – naughty girls carry both of them next to my heart. Your code ne drove me frantic – but, yes, I've cracked it. W fulfilment and memories of prep-school helped Very useful! I've been thinking about lbhe oernfg day, and how it feels when I pbzr vafvqr you. Do know what it does to me when you gbhpu zl pbp: was thinking about it today, in the middle o production meeting – concentration badly impair Also had the most rabezbfh rerpgvba. Most barrassing.

Darling, promise me: I don't want you to w about *anything*. We can go as slow or as fast as want – at the moment, I can't think beyond the when I next see you. I just want to take you in arms. I will never rush you, darling, please beli me. If I should ever sound hasty, it's because I'm impatient to be with you. Darling, you are in thoughts, day and night. Everything I see and do think is only for you. I watch the sun rise and moon shine and, unless I can tell you about them, th have no meaning at all. Oh, Lindsay, I wish you w here. Darling, your absence makes my heart *ache*.

I've been trying to convince myself that this sud parting could be of use – a baptism of fire, perha When we return to England, I'll have to be Yorkshire most of the time, and I'm praying that t

separation now will help us to bear that one. What do you think? We'll still be able to talk to each other, the way we do now. I'll have a mobile. You can always leave messages – coded or otherwise! – on my machines. Then, if you're at Shute – and I hope you will be, darling – I'll be able to come down to see you on odd days and the occasional weekends. It's about four hours door to door – I've been working out times and best routes! And you might like to come up to Yorkshire, perhaps, to see at first hand the sheer soul-destroying tedium of actual filming, in what will probably be snow or pouring rain, I expect.

Then you could have the dubious pleasure of meeting the famous Nic Prick – you remember? The one who played Prospero to my definitive Caliban at school? He was called Hicks-Henderson then, and he was a world-class jerk aged fourteen. He remains one. He flew in here yesterday from LA – or the Coast, as he likes to call it. I was counting his name-dropping rate: it was three a minute when he arrived; he got it up to six a minute by the time he left for New York. I realized that Tomas is very devious and very smart: the Gilbert Markham character Nic's playing is a smug, vain, sanctimonious, prurient prat – type-casting. After he'd called me 'Col' fifteen times, I remarked on this. Sarcasm wasted: he was delighted – but then *he* thinks Markham is the hero. I think Tomas was very amused at that. Have you started reading *Tenant*, darling? I want to know if you agree with Rowland – maybe there were things I missed.

Must concentrate. Darling – two things. First, you remember what I told you yesterday about events in Glacier Park? Well, the police arrived in force not long after we spoke, and apparently that identification is now confirmed: an Australian tourist – gay, I think.

He'd only arrived in the States a few weeks before and had been hitching. No family over here, his family back home not close and not sure of his travel plans, didn't know he was heading for Montana etc., etc. That's why it's all dragged on so long. When he hadn't written or called for four months, some cousins finally raised the alarm. They did the ID from dental chart records, I think. Poor, poor man.

This means, of course, that JK is alive – but I always *knew* he was, you remember? Apart from those events at the loft, I could *sense* him there. I can sense his presence here too – the result, well, you can imagine: phones never stop ringing, everyone edgy, security people crawling all over the place, and Tomas utterly silent on the entire issue, though you can see he's in the most terrible state, terrified for his son. He was on the phone to NL for three *hours* today and came back grim-faced – worked us all until nearly midnight, which is when I began writing this.

I can't wait to get out of this place and come back to you. Which brings me to my second point. Darling, about Thanksgiving. I'm so glad! It will give Emily a great deal of pleasure, and it's only dinner, after all. She'll be inviting some other people, I expect – she always makes rather a big thing of Thanksgiving. Don't know who. Don't care. I shall only have eyes for you.

Darling, I've been thinking, I'm so desperate to see you. Tomas leaves early Wednesday morning to join NL for Thanksgiving – I'm going to fly back with him in one of the studio's jets; it's the quickest way I can get back to New York. I'll be there by midday on Wednesday, so here's a suggestion: Darling, why don't I book us a marvellous room at the Plaza for Wednesday and Thursday night? That would mean you'd save on the expense of a room at the Pierre –

onomy, darling. think of that! And we could meet at the Plaza, like wicked, illicit lovers, wouldn't that be fun? You could show me your sultry slink, then we could go up to our room and stay there shamelessly for a day and a half – until we have to leave Thursday evening for Emily's Thanksgiving beanfeast. Would you like that?

I know you want to see Gini and her husband, and Markov and Jippy – as they're all tied up for dinner, why don't you get them to meet us in the Oak Room at the Plaza for Thanksgiving drinks? Sevenish? Then you and I could go on to Emily's – I'm bribing her to let me sit next to you. I intend to do unspeakable things to you, hidden by the tablecloth – I want to see if you can keep a straight face . . .

I'd love to meet your friends – especially Markov. Did you realize that I spent our first-meeting lunch in Oxford worrying about him? From the moment Tom and Rowland first mentioned his name, I was in a state of jealous torment: I thought he might be your lover – that's why I started drinking like a fish. Total panic. Very glad *indeed* that he's gay.

Oh Lindsay, Lindsay, what have you done to me? I'm usually a man of great equilibrium, as you know. Always calm, always confident, and yet now – Are you smiling, darling? You have the most beautiful smile in the world; it lights up a room. Of course, you also have the most beautiful, the most desirable coenrsgf in the world. I kiss them. Oh God, I wish I were vafvqr lbh now, darling.

I'm sending this by fax – shouldn't really, but the post is so *slow*. Darling, I'll be with you Wednesday. Let me know *re* above Plaza plot etc. when we speak. I'm sorry this letter is so long, but it's been a vile day, and I was feeling miserable without you. I've just read your letter again – Oh, Lindsay. Trust me, darling. It made me so happy, what you said about the *simplicity*

of our shpxvat – I feel that too. I kiss all your beloved
asterisk bits. I send you my love. Only 101 hour
until I next see you. Stars very bright tonight. Almos
a full moon. Yours, darling,
Colin.

THANKSGIVING

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XIII

In Oxford that Wednesday, the day before Thanksgiving, Katya was enduring the last fifteen minutes of a tutorial. It was being conducted by her senior tutor, Dr Miriam Stark, a woman whose cool intelligence Katya feared; it concerned the use of narrators in two novels by the Brontës. It had begun with Katya reading aloud to Dr Stark the essay she had written on this subject, comparing Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* with her sister Anne's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*; it had continued with Dr Stark's analysis of that essay; the questions had been unrelenting and the criticisms barbed.

Katya, who had begun writing having done too little preparation, and who had continued writing with her mind on quite a different subject, was aware this essay was a poor effort. For several weeks now, Katya had been suffering a certain mental and emotional turmoil; reading her essay aloud, she had realized that turmoil and confusion were evident in every line. In an obstinate way, she continued reading, praying Dr Stark might not notice the skimpiness of her arguments, praying she might be impressed by the two obscure critical references Katya had tacked on at the last moment, and – failing that – might be distracted by Katya's aggressive and iconoclastic tone.

Dr Stark had not been distracted by such frills; she was concentrating on fabric, on basic tailoring, and for the past twenty minutes had been scissoring Katya's offering apart.

graduated *summa cum laude* from Barnard, but whose MA and PhD had been awarded by Oxford. She was in her late thirties, was beautiful, highly distinguished, and *thin*, which seemed unfair.

Dr Stark, famously unmarried, had a cloistered air about her; she possessed an aura, Katya always felt, of steely, determined, female dedication. She was a Fellow of Oxford's last remaining women's college, a college which Katya had applied in a burst of feminism she now regretted, and she was the kind of woman who could spend half an hour dissecting the implications of one word.

'Katya, I can see your mind was not on this essay when you wrote it, and is not on it now . . .' Dr Stark paused, having caught Katya staring moodily through the window at the quadrangle and pouring rain outside.

'Yes, well possibly,' Katya mumbled, taking refuge in mutiny. 'I don't really like either novel.' She eyed Dr Stark. 'All that hysterical spinsterish passion. I don't really go for the Brontës at all.'

'Evidently,' Dr Stark replied, showing no inclination to argue with that kind of coat-trailing idiocy. 'Katya, have you asked yourself why it is you have these problems with women writers? *All* women writers?'

'I don't,' said Katya, who on principle never admitted to having a problem with anything.

'Katya – it is most marked. It was apparent in your work on Eliot, even on Austen. It is most apparent here. I set you this particular essay, Katya, because I hoped it might suggest to you that these novels, far from consisting of womanish outpourings, as you seem to believe, are schematic, and very carefully planned.'

She frowned. 'I find it strange, Katya, that in addressing yourself – intermittently, as I think you will admit – to the question of narrative techniques, you have

with foolish prejudice.' She paused. 'Such skills, I sometimes fear, are endangered – might even be on the way to becoming extinct. Except, of course, in places such as this . . .'

She glanced towards the quadrangle; Katya glanced at her watch.

'Such skills,' Dr Stark continued, 'useful in the study of literature, can occasionally be of use in life.' She paused. 'Katya, something is wrong. You have abilities and on the evidence of this essay, you are squandering them. You are, when you wish to be, intelligent. You were most certainly not in an intelligent frame of mind when writing this, nor are you in a receptive frame of mind now. Katya, you are clearly distracted by some other matter – would you like to tell me what that is?'

'No,' said Katya.

'Deal with it,' Dr Stark replied, gathering up her skirt and rising to her feet. 'You are at liberty to waste your own time, but not mine. Six thousand words on the complexities and significance of the heavily disguised time scheme in *Wuthering Heights* by next Tuesday. Should you feel disposed to rewrite this particular essay it would be of benefit.'

Sod it, thought Katya, rising hastily, as Dr Stark whisked past her and moved to her desk. She thought of her own novel, begun on a sudden impulse earlier that week, at three o'clock in the morning, when Tom was fast asleep. It was told, in the first person, by a woman twenty years older than Katya: she had been pleased by its world-weary tone, its éclat and its bite. It now occurred to her, as Dr Stark began to gather up armfuls of papers and books, that perhaps first-person female narration was a mistake. Why not have two narrators? Four? Omniscient third person? No, far too dated. A subtle combination of first and third? Stream of consciousness? Diaries? Some metafictional folderol, perhaps? It came to Katya that her narrator, who was

course not a heroine, but merely a *voice*, would function far more effectively with testicles. She was perfecting this sex change in her head, and wondering whether it might toughen up that interesting section on page four, when she realized that Dr Stark, saying something about picking up lamb chops from Sainsbury's, was accompanying her out of the door.

They crossed the quad together and turned out into the street. There, Katya, striding along in a bad temper, combat cap pulled low on her brow, head lowered against the rain, collided with someone in a black suit and a black overcoat.

'Good heavens,' said Dr Stark, coming to an abrupt halt. 'Rowland? It is Rowland, isn't it? I can't believe it. It must be fifteen years.'

It was indeed, and undeniably, Rowland McGuire. His hair was very wet; his coat was soaked; his expression was grim, dazed and dark. Katya, lip curling, thought he had a Rochester look.

'Miriam,' he said, as Dr Stark blushed a slow, deep crimson. 'I — this is a surprise. I've been looking for Katya—'

'And now you have found her. Fortunate.'

'This city is *impossible*. You can't *park* in it. You can't *drive* in it. Katya, I'm looking for Tom. I need to see Tom. Urgently . . . Yes, almost fifteen years, Miriam.' He paused, frowning. 'After the Commem. Ball. York-shire, I think.'

'How accurate you are, Rowland. But then you always were.' Dr Stark smiled in a somewhat dangerous way. 'I agree about the traffic in this city. One always ends up going around in circles, don't you find? And now I must leave you. I'm late for a lecture, as it is . . .'

She disappeared. Katya had decided twenty seconds before that she did believe in destiny after all; she glared hard at the walls of her college.

'She's not going to a lecture. She's going to

Sainsbury's to buy lamb chops,' she said, in an angry voice. 'Why did she blush? She never blushes.'

'I haven't the least idea,' replied Rowland, in a tone that precluded further questions. He began walking away in the direction Dr Stark had taken, then halted abruptly and turned back.

'Tom,' he said, in what Katya felt was an odd, wild and highly agitated manner. 'I have to see Tom.'

'Well, you can't. Not today.' Katya was dressed in jeans and a workman's donkey jacket; she turned up its collar against the rain and scowled. 'Tom's in Scotland - Edinburgh. He flew up this morning for some stupid debating thing.'

'Scotland? Today? Christ.'

Katya gave him a venomous look. 'And he doesn't get back until tomorrow night,' she continued, setting off up the street. 'So you're out of luck. You should have phoned.'

'Phoned? I've been phoning since nine o'clock this morning. I've phoned his house; I've phoned his college, your college . . . I damn near drove off the motorway calling on the mobile . . . Scotland? It's term time, for God's sake.'

'Even so,' Katya said, walking faster, 'he doesn't have lectures. He rejigged his tutorials. Things have *changed*, Rowland, since your day. This place isn't the prison it used to be. *Shit*.' She came to a sudden halt. 'That bloody woman.'

'What woman?'

'Dr Stark. She just took an essay of mine apart.'

'That's her job.' Rowland had caught up with her; he frowned along the street. 'I didn't realize she was your tutor. It wasn't a good essay then?'

'No, it was a fucking awful one.' Katya glowered. 'My mind wasn't on it. My mind was on *other things*.'

She looked at Rowland closely as she made this remark; he seemed to pay it little attention.

'The Brontës,' Katya said, in furious tones. '*Wuthering Heights. The Tenant of Wildfell Hall. Passion.* Much that bloody Stark woman knows on that subject. Love – yawn bloody yawn.'

'She must know something on the subject. Miriam Stark wrote an excellent book on the Brontës.' Rowland continued to frown along the street. 'She was re-searching it when I knew her. I went to the Brontë parsonage in Haworth with her once . . .' He broke off and turned back to Katya. 'Never mind that now. Is there somewhere I can reach Tom? Do you have a number for him? Damn, no. That's no good. I need to see him . . .' Rowland looked up and down the street in a distracted way, as if expecting Tom to materialize at any second.

Katya gave him a withering look and strode off again.

'I can give him a message if you like,' she said, over her shoulder, 'or you can leave him a note. I'm going over to his room now. It's up to you.'

'A note. Yes, a note. That's an excellent idea . . .' Rowland accelerated his pace, overtook her, and set off up the street, Katya finding it difficult to keep up with him.

'Is that your car?' she said, in an accusing tone, as they finally reached Tom's house, having walked a considerable distance, in heavy rain, without a single word being spoken. Katya glared at the car in question, which was drawn up outside the front gate and parked in an impetuous way, one wheel on the pavement.

'Yes. Yes, it is—'

'Interesting,' said Katya, kicking the wheel. 'I always wondered what you drove . . .' She followed Rowland through the gate and caught up with him at the front door.

'And strange as it may seem,' she continued, in a poisonous tone, 'it's no good pushing and shoving at the door like that. You need a key. Luckily, I have one.'

'Here,' she said, as they entered Tom's room, a room which seemed to have a peculiar effect on Rowland McGuire. He was staring at the cerise sofa, then at the bookshelves; Katya held out a notebook and a pen to him. The pen was a biro, an unremarkable biro; looking at it, Rowland appeared transfixed.

'*Christ*,' he said again, directing his remark to the bookshelves. He looked at the notebook. 'What shall I say?'

'That's rather up to you, Rowland,' said Katya, in an acid voice. She gave him a measuring look and slowly unbuttoned and removed the donkey jacket. She pulled off her combat cap and shook loose her long, damp russet hair.

'Tom - I need to talk to you,' Rowland wrote. He paused, frowning, then added, 'as soon as possible.' He frowned again, then added, 'I'll call you next week.'

'What's the date?' He looked up at Katya. 'The date - what date is it today?'

'It's the twenty-fifth. Wednesday, the twenty-fifth.' Katya gave him an un pitying stare. 'You'll find there's a date window on your watch, actually. I can see it from here.'

'Oh, yes, of course. Thanksgiving tomorrow. *Hell*,' said Rowland. He added the date to the note, frowned again and added, 'Kind regards, Rowland' and made for the door.

Katya panicked. 'I can make you a cup of coffee if you like,' she said, in an ungracious tone.

'No time,' Rowland replied. 'Thank you, but no time - I have to get back to London. I have a plane to catch . . .'

Katya listened to his footsteps descending the staircase. It was at this window, just a few weeks before, that she had watched him arrive in Colin Lascelles's astonishing Aston Martin. It was then, she thought, that she had first sensed the tremors; it was beside these very

bookshelves, as Rowland McGuire examined that Anne Brontë novel, that everything right in her life had begun to go wrong.

She strode up and down the room, clasp- ing to her chest one of Tom's discarded sweaters. She found she was angry, confused and close to tears. Tossing the sweater down, she crossed to her work table and picked up the chapters of her novel, printed out early that morning, after Tom had left.

She had not wanted him to see what she had written and now, rereading it, she saw why. She began to see the nakedness and duplicities of her own fictions. Snatching up the pages, she tore them into halves, then quarters, then eighths. Overwhelmed with guilt and misery, she threw this confetti on the floor. 'Fuck, fuck, fuck,' she said aloud, filled with rage against Rowland McGuire and herself, and furious at discovering that her novel was not about alienation, as she had supposed, but about love – a feeble topic, a woman's topic, after all.

She picked up one of the Brontë novels that had been the subject of her essay, and scowled at it. She flicked the pages, and then, her eye caught by a particular sentence, began reading. She carried the book across to the cerise sofa and curled up with it there.

What had she missed? What, exactly, had she missed? She began reading, mindful of Dr Stark's corrective scorn; to her surprise, the craving she now felt for Rowland McGuire diminished somewhat as she began to concentrate. Perhaps the exercising of her intellect would effect a cure, she thought, hoping that might be the case, for the craving was unlike any she had experienced before, and its nagging, obsessional vitality was something she had come to fear.

To her relief, this prose kept Rowland at bay for a while; despite the passion she had sneered at in her tutorial – or, possibly, because of it – she was still

reading two hours later, completely absorbed. Three hours later, stirred by what she had read, she felt a need to confess. Picking up pen and paper, she began writing to Tom.

'It's going to snow - there's a storm threatening,' Colin remarked as the limousine which had collected them at Kennedy turned out of the airport precincts. Beside him, Tomas Court, who had not spoken to him once on the flight from Montana, gave a sigh.

'It'll hold off. It's hours away yet,' he replied. He gave Colin a shrewd glance. 'What time are you meeting your friend?'

'Around one o'clock. One-thirty. At the Plaza.'

Colin craned his neck to look at the clouds bunched over the western horizon; they were edged with a jaundiced light. With difficulty, he prevented himself from consulting his watch which he had been checking at five-minute intervals throughout their flight.

'Relax.' Court gave a half smile. 'I won't make you late for your appointment. I guess you're pretty anxious to be on time . . .'

'Does it show that badly?' Colin asked.

'I recognize the symptoms,' Court replied, his manner kind enough, but faintly bored. 'What's her name?'

'Lindsay,' Colin said, his heart lifting as it always did when he pronounced, heard, thought of, or saw this name.

'We'll drop you at the Conrad,' Court continued. 'You find those pictures and notes, bring them down to TriBeCa . . . It won't take us long to go through them. Half an hour at most, then you'll be a free man.'

His tone, Colin felt, was slightly mocking. He considered arguing, then rejected the idea. The photographs concerned, in which Tomas Court had previously evinced little interest, showed the moorland landscape around their chosen Wildfell Hall. They were now lying

in their file in Colin's room at the Conrad; overnight, Tomas Court had decided that he had to re-examine them urgently. Colin, not pleased by this decision, which indeed threatened to delay him, was wary of protest. He now felt a growing respect, even affection, for Court, but he retained a keen sense of the man's perversity. If he demurred now, Court was more than capable of keeping him working throughout the afternoon.

Let him try, Colin thought; he had every intention, should that situation arise, of proving to Prospero that he had a will of his own. Meanwhile, it was simpler to humour his whim, produce the required pictures, which would almost certainly turn out to be irrelevant, agree with everything Court said, and then make his escape from TriBeCa to the joys that lay in wait for him uptown.

Court, meanwhile, had relapsed into a moody silence. Colin patted the breast pocket of his jacket, where Lindsay's letter and fax to him lay folded against his heart. Not for the first time that morning, he blessed the fact that he and the uncommunicative Court were travelling alone. Thalia Ng had left that morning to spend Thanksgiving with her widowed mother in Florida; Mario Schwartz had left to join his family in what he called Hicksville, Idaho; the rest of the production team had dispersed to various parts of America, leaving Colin to travel with the person least likely to interrupt his reveries. With relief, touching that precious letter, Colin began to rehearse its phrases in his mind.

There had been a 'but' in Lindsay's fax, a 'but' that drew Colin's eyes every time he reread it; there were fewer 'buts' in the letter, however, and this gave Colin heart.

He was almost certain that he could hear a new note in these sentences, as if Lindsay, writing to him from her hotel room, had begun to hear the same music that haunted him; Colin's mind dwelt on that music and its melodies. His hopes rose as they approached

Manhattan; this city contained Lindsay and very shortly she would be on her way to meet him at the Plaza. Find the photographs, he told himself, deliver them to Court's loft, make his escape. He dived out of the limousine in great haste as it pulled up in front of the Conrad, and entered that building blindly, praying that he would be eloquent, not tongue-tied, when he took Lindsay in his arms.

In the limousine, Tomas Court continued his journey south to TriBeCa; he watched the streets of Manhattan as they drove, and felt a familiar despondency settle upon him. He felt a brief, passing longing for the pure air, and the spaciousness, the great spaciousness, of Montana; then, remembering the interviews he had had with the police there, and the subsequent sleepless nights, he passed his hand across his face and closed his eyes.

On reaching TriBeCa he dismissed his driver, shouldering his bag himself, and stepped into the grim confines of the elevator. As its doors closed, he tensed; he had heard a sound, a small unidentifiable sound, perhaps the scrape of a shoe against concrete, and it had come from a landing above. The air in the elevator was faintly perfumed: the residue of a woman's scent clung to the air, and when he reached his floor and stepped out, he saw that a woman was there before him. She was in the act of tapping at his door; hearing the elevator, she started, then swung around.

She gave a low exclamation, then blushed, then took a step backwards; Court saw that she was carrying a small package – a package with his name on it written in large capitals – and that she was clutching this package to her breast, somewhat defensively. Court gave her a wary look, hesitated, then moved forward. He did not recognize her, but he recognized her type instantly: an out-of-work actress, he thought, with irritation – either that or, possibly, some fan.

unfastened; he could just see the cleft between her breasts. He noted that she had small, well-manicured pretty hands.

'Two minutes,' he said and opened the door.

'You're an actress, aren't you?' he said, once the door was closed. He looked around the unnaturally tidy space of his loft: Thalia and Colin had made a thorough job of their cleansing operation, he saw. Without those piles of cardboard boxes, the room looked unfamiliar and faintly alien. He turned back to the woman with a sense of boredom, wondering how she would script her overtures, whether she would echo the words of her numerous predecessors, or whether she might surprise him by being original. He did not expect originality from women in this situation, nor was he going to receive it, he thought, as with an odd, defiant, half-obstinate glance in his direction, she set her package down delicately on his work table, and then began to unbutton her blouse.

'Sure, I've been an actress.' She gave another small frown. 'In a few crummy movies, blink and you miss me - that kind of thing. I've done a few TV shows. That's what's on the tape - kind of a composite: my best scenes, my best roles. The kind where I actually got to speak some dialogue . . .' She paused, an expression of faint mockery passing across her face. 'I've done other things besides acting, obviously. I mean, I've held down a whole lot of demanding positions. I've been a model, I worked in a gas station one time. Let's see . . . what else? Waited on tables, of course. But that was way back, when I was a student at UCLA . . .'

Court looked at her steadily; he could hear a certain anger in her voice, and for an instant saw it flash in her yellowish eyes. Liking the anger, he changed his mind.

'Look,' he said, less coldly, 'do your blouse up. You've been misinformed, I think. I don't audition this way.'

'Don't you? That's not what I heard. I asked around.

I take an interest in you – I have done for years.’ She hesitated, eyeing him, clasping her blouse across her breasts. ‘I really admire your movies – I wanted to tell you that. I’ve watched them a thousand times. I think you’re a really great director . . .’

Court turned away with a gesture of irritation. Her voice, with its faint hint of southern California, was beginning to grate on him. He liked neither her voice, nor her sentiments, and the momentary sympathy he had felt for her ebbed away.

‘Some people like my movies; some people loathe them, and either way, I’m indifferent,’ he said. ‘Also, I’m allergic to compliments – particularly fulsome ones. Do your blouse up. I’m expecting a colleague here any minute . . .’

Her response surprised him: he was used to obedience when he used that kind of tone. The girl seemed scarcely to have heard him and she ignored the contempt in his voice. She continued to look at him as he spoke, that small perplexed frown still creasing her brows. Then, with a sigh, and another yellowish glance in his direction, she began to move slowly around the room, her manner unhurried, as if she were here alone and waiting for someone to return.

She moved across to the tall windows, then back to the work table; in a desultory way, she removed her coat, then brushed her hand across a pile of scripts, picked up a book, examined it, then set it down. She moved with a grace that interested Court; her silence and her apparent absorption in her activities began to affect him. He wondered whether she had realized that he was likelier to respond to silence, and its ambiguities, far more than words.

As she moved around the room, he began to track her with his eyes as he might have done with a camera; he found the chemistry of the room was altering, thickening and becoming charged. She had his attention

now and he found he was interested in what she might do next: spoil the effect by speaking? Move towards the door and leave? She did move towards the door, and this Court felt a sharp and immediate pulse of excitement; for the first time in almost three years he was remembering how much such encounters could fuel him and how reliably, if briefly, they drove all thoughts of his wife from his mind.

He took a step towards the woman and regarded her levelly. He watched the light slide across the planes of her face; he watched a new concentration enter her eyes.

'When did you say your colleague was joining you?' she asked. 'Any minute now?'

Her eyes rested on his for a moment; then, with a glance of perfect understanding, she unfastened the door, and left it ajar.

She moved a little to the side of it and leaned back against the wall. Court took a step towards her, then another. He came to a halt just in front of her; he could now smell the scent of her body; he could sense the warmth of her skin, and see the rise and fall of her breasts as she breathed. The desire to touch her deepened and Court's body stirred. From the landing beyond, through the crack of the opened door, came the sound of the elevator. It whirled into life; the clanking and shiftings of machinery came from its shaft. Going up, or down? Court was unsure. He was almost certain that it would be twenty minutes at least before Colonel Lascelles arrived, but since the woman had begun to move about his room time had slowed, so he might have been wrong.

The possibility of discovery excited him further, and the woman seemed to share that taste, or at least to accept it. An expression of quiet and concentrated complicity had now entered her eyes. Reaching forward she took his hand and guided it inside her open blouse. Her breasts had the unnatural jut that betrayed

silicone implants; beneath them, he could just feel the thin ridge of the enhancement operation's scar. This unnatural plasticity, he found, also excited him; the woman gave a small sharp intake of breath that might have indicated pleasure. Court moved his hand up so that it rested against the base of her neck; he exerted a faint pressure downwards. This signal, or suggestion, she responded to at once; she smiled, revealing pretty, perfect teeth, then, with a quick caress from her small pretty hand, and a glance that might have been one of triumph, she obeyed him without speaking, and knelt down in front of him on the floor.

'No, no, no,' said Colin, darting past his great-aunt Emily, who was intent on waylaying him. 'Emily, I can't talk now, I'll be late. I have to go . . .'

He snatched up the pile of photographs and notes for Tomas Court and, dodging furniture, made for the hall.

'Supposing there's a crisis?' Emily said, pursuing him. 'I ought to be able to reach you – in emergencies only, I understand . . .'

'Crisis? What crisis? Why should there be a crisis?' Colin cried, in desperate tones. 'Emily, I'll be *late*. Let me go . . .'

'Anything could happen!' Emily replied, somewhat dramatically. 'Supposing I died? Supposing I fell down the stairs? What about a heart attack? I expect a heart attack at any time, and if I had one, I might need to contact you . . .'

'Christ,' said Colin, rolling his eyes.

'I won't tell a soul. I swear I won't call – unless I am actually dying, obviously . . .'

Emily paused. Her voice took on a wheedling tone Colin instantly recognized, since he himself used it when necessary, and knew it rarely failed.

'The Pierre? The Plaza? The Carlyle?'

'Give me a *break*,' cried Colin, opening the door.

was over. The brief allure the woman had possessed for him had now gone, and he was without further interest in her. His one concern now was to extricate himself as quickly as possible from this formulaic event, and, looking down at her, he was just considering which of his old formulaic devices would ensure her swift departure, when something caught his eye.

The woman was still kneeling, head bent, face hidden; during the course of her ministrations she had removed her blouse, which now lay beside her on the floor. As she bent forward to pick it up, Court's eyes rested on her bared back; he had been looking down at the discernible line of her spine as he assessed the best way to get rid of her; as she moved, the strands of dark hair that fell across her shoulders parted, and Court glimpsed – he was not sure what he glimpsed, but he heard himself make a small, disbelieving sound.

The woman's face jerked up towards him; she made another quick movement, but Court was too swift for her. Before she could rise, he stepped forward and forced her back down. With a low exclamation of anger and surprise, he parted the thick strands of dark hair, exposing her left shoulder. And no, he had not imagined it: there, in almost precisely the right place, high on the left scapula, was a tattoo – a tattoo of a small, crouching and delicate black spider.

He jerked away from her and pushed her aside. He stepped back, his face pale. Slowly, the girl straightened up. She wiped her hand across her mouth, met his gaze and frowned.

'I told you I admired your movies,' she said.

'That's a foolish way to express admiration. Write a letter next time. I'll make sure one of the secretaries answers it.'

'Write a letter?' Colour swept up into her face. 'That's what you advise? Mr Court, I'll remember that.'

She reached for her blouse, put it back on and began

to button it up. Court watched her in silence. When she had put her coat on also, and began to move toward the door, his anxieties eased somewhat. He began to tell himself that he had been lucky, that the risk had been greater than he had realized, but that the risk was over now. In the doorway, however, she paused.

'You don't remember, do you?' she said, resting her yellowish gaze on his, and voicing the question in a quiet tone.

'Remember what?' Court replied, moving forward a few inches.

'The last time we did this.' She looked slowly around the room; Court frowned.

'You're mistaken,' he began. 'I think it would be better if you went now. I told you—'

'Oh, *I'm* not mistaken, you are.' She hesitated, a slightly almost coy note coming into her voice. 'It's OK, I don't blame you. Why would you remember? I was blonde at the time. Quite a lot younger. It was very brief—nothing special, I guess, as far as you were concerned. What would it be? I was the third that week, after all.'

'I don't know what you're talking about; we've never met. I don't even know your name . . .'

'It's Jackie.' She gave him a sidelong glance. 'That's all. Well, never mind. I understand how it is. I understand when. I mean, you were under a whole lot of pressure. I could see that. The great director! Only the movie wasn't going too well; you were having technical problems—problems with Natasha too, I think . . .'

The use of his wife's name startled Court and angered him.

'Whatever problems I was having,' he said coldly, 'I couldn't have discussed them with you, I'm very sorry about that. So—'

'No, you didn't.' She gave a low laugh. 'The way I recall it, you didn't say too much of anything. You kicked me that time . . .'

She paused, the tiny fro-

here . . . I guess I came to see if you'd changed. You might have been different now. I thought . . .' She hesitated. 'You're older now; you're divorced. People say you're pretty ill – I guess I thought you might be kinder, you know.'

'And do you find me altered?' Court asked, watching her closely.

'Oh no.' She glanced away. 'You're exactly the same. I never quite got you out of my head, you see – so I guess I wanted to be sure . . .'

'Maybe we should meet again,' he said, with care. 'You might revise your views. Do you have an address? A phone number? You live here in New York? I'm going to be in the city for a few more days . . .'

A small derisive smile flickered across her features. 'I have to go now,' she said. 'Maybe we'll run into each other – you never know . . .'

And with that, before he could prevent her, she was out of the door. She left it ajar; Court, knowing there were better methods of pursuit, did not attempt to follow her. He could still hear her footsteps on the stairs as he reached for the telephone and began dialling. Then another idea came to him. He replaced the receiver and picked up the videotape she had brought with her. His hands a little unsteady and his breathing tightening, he inserted it in his machine.

He had expected some message, some revelation, some clue. The tape was blank; discovering this, he reached again for the phone.

Now,' Colin heard, through the door, as he reached Court's landing. 'I'm not interested – just find the records; they must be on file. I want to know her name and who hired her . . . I told you, *The Soloist* – it's five and a half years ago. You check the payroll records. What? No, I don't know. Try Wardrobe, Confidentiality, Make-Up . . . You think I don't realize that?

seemed blind to him – he gave a small dance of agitation and mouthed the words, ‘Late – have to go’.

Court gave no sign of receiving this message either he had begun speaking again. Stealthily, Colin edged into the doorway. He was about to turn and flee when after a pause Court said, ‘Ah, God, yes,’ and replaced the phone

The way in which he spoke halted Colin. There was a note of extremity in his voice which Colin had never heard before, and which awoke an instant anxiety. He began to realize that this was not an ordinary conversation, and that Court was in the grip of some strong notion. Forgetting his cab and his haste for a moment, Colin saw that Court’s face was blanched of colour, and that he was now breathing with difficulty. As Colin turned back to him, he leaned against the table as if to steady himself, and stood there in silence, head bowed.

‘Tomas, are you all right?’ Colin began, moving towards him. ‘What’s happened? Here, sit down . . .’

He reached for a chair, but Court, straightening up and steadying his breathing, waved it aside.

‘Nothing’s wrong.’ His pale gaze rested on Colin’s for an instant. ‘Some problem’s come up – casting, nothing for you to worry about; not your concern. Those are the pictures I wanted? Thank you . . .’

‘Tomas, you don’t look well . . .’ Colin hesitated, troubling his conscience. He thought of his late-night conversation with Court at the ranch, a few days before. He thought of the candour and bleakness with which Court had spoken of his love for his wife and his continuing hopes for a reconciliation. Colin had sensed that was the first time he had ever discussed this with anyone. He had pitied him then, and looking at Court’s drawn face, he pitied him now.

‘Let me call someone, Tomas,’ he said. ‘You shouldn’t be alone. Maybe I should call that doctor of yours, just to check you’re all right . . .’ He hesitated again, then

submitted to his conscience. 'I can stay,' he continued, 'if it would help. I can stay for a while . . .'

'I think not.' A flash of dour amusement came into Court's eyes. 'I appreciate the generosity of the offer, but you mustn't keep this Lindsay of yours waiting. You promised you you'd be on time - I don't want to break my word.'

'I can call her,' Colin began, trying hard to suppress his misery. 'Really, Tomas, she'll understand. You look - you're terribly pale.'

'It's nothing. It's passed. Off you go . . .'

 He gave a dry smile. 'And I hope you've remembered a present. It is Thanksgiving, after all.'

Colin felt a rush of gratitude and liking. He thought of the elegant pale-blue Tiffany's box safely stowed in his bags.

'I have. I bought it in New York, the morning before I left for the ranch. Just in case I couldn't find anything in Montana . . .'

'Very wise. What one finds in Montana does not take too portable a form.' Court paused, then added somewhat awkwardly, 'I hope you liked the ranch.'

'I did,' Colin replied.

'It's isolated, of course. My son loves it. Ah well.' Court gave a sigh, held out his hand and clasped Colin's.

'Enjoy your Thanksgiving. I'll be speaking to you on Monday, in England, as arranged. And you can relax. It won't be before.'

Colin hesitated still, alarmed by something in Court's manner, by a note of resignation or fatigue he had never heard in Court's voice before. With another dry smile, Court turned away from him and took out the photographs he had requested. He waved Colin away. Colin, moving towards the door, watched him bend over these images of a bleak northern landscape. He thought of Thalia's assertion that Tomas Court was without friends. He could believe that. Court seemed to him

be a man inexperienced at intimacy, slow to trust, and awkward at indicating regard. His attempts to convey liking, both at the ranch and now, touched Colin. He wished Court goodbye, unease and affection tugging at his heart.

Then he remembered Lindsay; his spirits rising at once, he sprinted down the stairs and out to his cab. He told the driver to get him uptown to the Plaza by the best route, and to break every record when doing so. The driver, amused by this demented Englishman, duly did so. Half an hour later, all thoughts of Tomas Court forgotten, Colin was walking into the lobby at the Plaza, his heart beating hard.

He was five minutes late. Meeting Lindsay, who was waiting for him, and who sprang to her feet as soon as he entered, he saw that she was even more nervous than he was. He took her hand, which felt small and cold, in his own. He watched colour come and go in her face; her eyes rested on his, their expression dazed and a little afraid. Colin, who had planned an amusing speech, found he was struck dumb; he could say nothing at all. He booked them both in under the name 'Lascelles', told the desk clerk to hold all calls until further notice, over-tipped the porter who showed them to their room, and, the second the man departed, fixed the 'Do Not Disturb' notice to the door.

He locked it. Lindsay had retreated, he saw; she had slipped away, past a table decked with flowers, and was standing in front of the tall windows that overlooked Central Park. Joy welled up in Colin's heart. She was wearing a new dress, and a coat he had not seen before; they were black, like most of her clothes. She was taller than Colin remembered, and slighter in build; with a sudden sense of her frailty, he saw that her small white hands were tightly clasped at the waist of her mereal coat. He saw the anxiety flare in her eyes, and sensed a new defencelessness in her. At this he felt

'The truth is – I love *you*,' he said quietly. 'I expect you've realized that. I tried to hide it when I wrote, and it couldn't be done. I meant to hide it now too – and I can't do that either. I love you so much it actually hurts. That's never happened to me before.'

Lindsay, moved by a sadness in his expression, by the directness and simplicity of his words, felt a rush of pure affection for him flood her heart. She gave a small flurried gesture of the hands; she raised her eyes to his, then looked quickly away. 'Oh God,' she began, her voice catching. 'You mustn't – I can't – I don't know who I am any more, Colin . . .'

Colin was hurt by that reply, but he hid it; it seemed to him that words were better avoided now. In a way that brooked no argument, he drew her to her feet and took her in his arms. He began to kiss her, and that kiss silenced them both. Feeling blind with sudden happiness, and certain he could see a similar blindness in her eyes, he caught her against him. He felt a mad conviction that they had no need for words, and that the language of his body was one she must understand.

He began to make love to her, in ways which he had had 101 hours to dream of and plan. By the time this eloquence was finally over, it was dark in the city outside, and a full moon was riding above the bare trees in Central Park. Lindsay, her body pleased, and her mind in disarray, gave a small cry of loss as he withdrew from her. She felt both broken and whole. In a frantic way, she began to press kisses against his throat and his chest, and to murmur endearments; taking his hand, with mingled sadness and happiness, she began to kiss his face, and his eyes, and his hair.

Colin's heart lifted; he felt a certainty of purpose, a contentment, and a calm deeper than he had ever known. He kissed Lindsay with great tenderness, then, having learned when it was wiser to remain silent, lay with her clasped against him, making no comment and

asking no questions, when she began to weep quietly in his arms.

'Rowland, you are handsomer than ever,' said Emily Lancaster, regarding him with affection and pouring him a very large bourbon indeed. Rowland, who was standing at the window of her drawing-room, did not respond. 'Close the curtains, would you?' Emily continued. 'I don't like to see the moon through glass; it's unlucky . . .'

'That's only when it's a new moon,' Rowland replied. He watched the trees move in the darkness of the Park then obeyed her instruction. Emily, who had been watching him thoughtfully, moved across to the sofa. 'Now come sit down,' she said. 'You must be exhausted – that long flight. Lord only knows what time it is by your body clock. Are you sure you won't let Frobisher get you something to eat? No? Rowland, my dear, I'm sure you must be suffering jet lag – even a man of your determination can't face that down.'

Rowland made some polite disclaimer. He seated himself beside her on the sofa; Emily budging her pug with a smile. She inspected him closely, putting on one of her pairs of spectacles to do so; she gave a small frown.

'Yes, you've definitely improved with age,' she pronounced. 'You have a dangerous look about you these days. An air of *perturbation*. I've always found *perturbation* attractive in a man. If I were forty years younger, Rowland, I'd fall madly in love with you, and we could have a *very* incautious affair.'

Rowland looked at Emily with affection; in the five years since he had last seen her, she had considerably aged. She could no longer hold herself as straight as she had once done, but her spirit, he sensed, was as indomitable as ever. He thought of the first time he had met her, when she came over to Oxford for Colin's

graduation. At sixty-five, she had been magnificent; and at eighty-five, wrapped in a shawl of heathery-coloured tweed, she was still magnificent. Rowland could see, though, the distortions time had made to her hands and spine; suspecting she might be in pain, he pitied her for the ravages of the last twenty years.

Liking her, and also knowing how astute she was, he tried to shake off his own exhaustion and despondency, to rally himself and respond.

'If you were forty years younger, Emily,' he said, 'you'd be playing havoc with my heart. And I wouldn't risk an affair: I'd propose.'

Emily smiled at this. 'Smartest move you could make,' she said. 'I'm one of the few women I know who could cope with you. I'd sort you out in no time. I'd be more than a match for you. What you need, Rowland, is a woman who's ten jumps ahead of you the entire time.'

'Do I?' Rowland said, giving her a glinting, green-eyed glance that made even Emily's eighty-five-year-old heart beat appreciably faster. 'Do I indeed?'

'My dear, it is very good *indeed* to see you.' Emily laughed. 'I'd forgotten how well you flirted. Wicked man! This is a pleasure – an unexpected one, too . . .'

'Yes, I had to leave London rather suddenly. It was a last minute thing.'

'What did you say brought you to New York, my dear?'

'Work,' said Rowland, who had not previously explained his presence. 'My paper's negotiating various link-ups with the *Times* here. We've suddenly run into a few problems.'

'How exciting. Oh dear.'

'So I came over to – finalize things.'

'Of course. But won't everyone be away, my dear? It is Thanksgiving tomorrow after all.'

'That shouldn't present any difficulties.'

Emily raised her eyebrows, but taking pity on him,

and he felt in limbo now. The two men had denied all knowledge of Lindsay's present whereabouts. Grimly, Rowland had booked himself in to the small cell that was the only room available there over Thanksgiving, and had started telephoning. Twenty calls later, he still had no information and no leads. As a last resort, he obtained Markov's Manhattan number from a giggling Pixie, in London, and dialled it. He did not expect a kind reception, nor did he get one.

'Looking for Lindsay?' Markov trilled, in his most infuriating tone. 'Too thrilling, my dear. I always *wondered* when you'd get round to it.'

'Where is she?' Rowland said, swallowing his pride. 'I need to talk to her and I need to talk to her *now*.'

'Can't help, I'm afraid.'

'Please,' said Rowland.

'Not a word I ever expected to hear on *your* lips,' cried Markov, detectable triumph in his tones. 'How are the mighty fallen, my dear.'

'Fuck it, Markov – where is she?'

'Sweetheart, I *genuinely* don't know. Tucked up in a love-nest somewhere, I suspect. With the new in-amorato. I can't *wait* to meet him. He sounds too charming for words.'

'Markov – have you ever been desperate?'

'Of *course*, darling. Most of the time.'

'Well, I'm desperate. No doubt that delights you. Help me out, here.'

Markov made a considering noise. 'I'm seeing a little cabin in the woods,' he said, in a maddening way. 'Could it be out of state? Yes, I think so. A *cosy* little cabin, somewhere très discreet. An *intimate* little cabin, with log fires . . .'

'Christ, Markov—'

'Oh, all right.' Markov gave way to the temptation to cause trouble, a temptation he could never bear to

resist for very long. 'I'm seeing the Oak Room at the Plaza, tomorrow evening at seven; they get back then. Thanksgiving drinks, darling. Jippy and I get to vet the inamorato. I gather . . .' Markov lowered his voice. 'I gather he has auburn hair, hyacinthine curls, diabolic eyebrows, an Apollonian body, and a way with women . . .'

'What fool gave you that description?' Rowland said, in a violent tone.

'Can't *think*, darling. Someone who knows him pretty well, I guess. Have to go now. Byeee.'

Replacing the phone, Rowland realized that even he, with a journalist's persistence, could not call every hotel with cabins in America; besides, there was an easier way. He dialled Emily's number at once; as a result, here he was – jet-lagged, exhausted, afflicted with a sense of whirling futile momentum, going nowhere exceedingly fast.

'I'm sorry to miss Colin,' he said, interrupting Emily and unable to bear prevarication any longer. 'I hear he's staying out of state somewhere with Lindsay.'

'Ah,' said Emily, bending to fondle her pug. 'Yes indeed.'

'Have they been away long?'

'Well, now, I'm not really sure. Colin's being a little secretive . . .'

'He wasn't secretive when I telephoned before,' Rowland said, hearing the bitterness in his own voice and realizing that he was losing his capacity to dissemble. Lindsay, he thought, would not judge his untruths to be cool or flagrant now. He turned to look at Emily. 'I gather marriage is on the cards.'

'He is very much in love,' Emily replied, in a quiet, firm tone.

'And are his feelings returned?'

'That I cannot answer. Lindsay would not confide in me. Though I would say . . .' She paused and turned her

blue gaze steadily upon Rowland. 'I would say they v admirably suited to one another, wouldn't you?'

Rowland's reaction confirmed everything Emily suspected, and told her all she needed to know. She his handsome face darken and an arrogant express mask his dismay. He gave her a cold, green-eyed glai and took a swallow of bourbon.

'I always find questions like that impossible to ansv They're foolish. Only two people can judge – and th the two people concerned.'

'Well, I think they're made for each other,' Emily s a little sharply; then, seeing the unhappiness in his ey she modified her tone. 'Consider,' she went on, 't are both vulnerable; they are both innocents – and I not mean that in a pejorative way. They both have open, sunny, optimistic disposition, though Colin, course, likes to dramatize his fears. They have a v similar sense of humour – which is very import indeed . . .'

She hesitated; Rowland, his face set, said nothi Emily looked around her room, wondering whether show him mercy or continue. She thought of her c versation here with Colin on the night she had first r Lindsay; love for her nephew, and protectiveness wards him, rose up in her heart. Continue, she decid and began speaking again, ignoring the stony express in Rowland's eyes.

'And then,' she went on, 'there are the long-te considerations. Lindsay is not in her first youth. She l one miserable marriage behind her. For twenty yea she has had to bring up a child alone. She has resilience, and a determination I admire – and th would be of great benefit to Colin . . .'

'They would be of benefit to anyone who marri her.'

'Indeed.' Emily gave him a sharp glance. 'But Co has admirable qualities too, let us not forget that. W

Colin, she could rely on unswerving loyalty and devotion . . .'

'I'm sure she would repay that in kind.'

'No doubt. My point is that with Colin she could be secure. He would be faithful, loving and considerate. He would make the very best of husbands . . .' She paused, then added, in a delicate way, 'Not all men are husband material, wouldn't you say?'

'I'd say appearances can be deceptive in that respect,' Rowland answered, somewhat roughly.

Emily made no reply, but continued to look at him, her expression kindly but perplexed; she gave a sigh.

'Well, well, I am very old now,' she said, in a quiet way, 'I look at these things differently from you, no doubt. I love Colin; his future happiness and well-being are very close to my heart.' She paused. 'I'm sure you will understand that, since you and Colin are such close friends, and have been for so many years.'

Rowland heard the undisguised note of warning in her voice; his eyes met hers.

'I also wish Colin well,' he began, in a stiff way. 'I like Colin and I respect him. I hope you know that—'

'Indeed I do. I also know what it is to experience a clash of loyalties. That is always painful, and especially so for an honourable man.'

Rowland coloured. 'I don't follow you,' he said, looking away.

'Oh, I think you do,' Emily said. She paused, her gaze resting thoughtfully on his face; then she made one of those lightning shifts of attack that Rowland remembered of old.

'You have thought of marrying, I imagine, Rowland?'

'I have thought of it. Yes.'

'And no doubt you would like children?'

'Yes, I would hope—' He stopped, suddenly seeing the unerring accuracy of her aim. He turned back to look at her. 'I would like to have a family, children—'

yes. I have no family of my own. So I had hoped to have children one day.'

Emily gave a small inclination of her head. Rowland saw pity come into her eyes.

'Colin also wants this,' she said quietly. 'In many ways, and despite the life he's led, Colin is and always has been, a very domestic man. He loves his home and is never happier than when he is at home. With the right wife, and God willing, with children, there is no doubt in my mind that he would be completely fulfilled. Of course, in Colin's case, there are additional reasons – I suppose one would have to call them dynastic reasons – why he should want children. He may deny it, but I know how deeply it matters to him, and to his father, that he should be able to pass Shute on to his son and heir.'

'I know that. I know exactly how much that matters to him.' Hope had come into Rowland's eyes. 'So I would have thought that—'

'So would I.' Emily cut him off with a small lift of her hand. Seeing her expression change, Rowland felt a second's foreboding; he could see that she was perhaps tiring, but she clearly intended to say something more, and knew it would be unwelcome. She looked at him with gravity and compassion, then sighed.

'You are an intelligent man, Rowland. No, sit down; there's something I want to tell you before you go. This question of children, of heirs. You should know – I discussed that very issue with Colin, here in this room, on the night he introduced me to Lindsay. I reminded him of Shute and the length of time his family has lived there. I reminded him of the entail . . .' She paused. 'I didn't use the word sacrifice to him then, but I will use it to you now.' She paused.

'To contemplate marriage to a woman who might, unhappily, be unable to bear a child, is perhaps the greatest sacrifice Colin could make. Yet he intends to

eighty-five-year-old mind felt fearful, and every one of her eighty-five-year-old bones seemed to ache.

She had suspected this conversation might be necessary as soon as Rowland telephoned and announced his arrival in New York; she had known, beyond doubt, that it was necessary when he entered, and she saw the expression on his face. She had begun this conversation feeling very sure of her ground, but now an old woman's incertitude gripped her. Confronted by the evidence of pain – and a man's pain, which she found harder to witness than a woman's – her mind felt flurried, muddled, and flooded with doubts.

'Rowland,' she began. 'Rowland, I'm so very sorry. Listen to me—'

'No, *I'm* sorry.' Rowland, his back to her, fought to steady his voice. 'You were right earlier. I'm desperately tired. I should take myself off . . .'

'I wish you wouldn't. At least stay and finish your drink.' She gave him an anxious look, then, as he slowly turned, held out her hand to him. 'If you go now, I'll feel I've offended you.'

'You certainly haven't done that.'

He hesitated, then, with a gentleness that surprised her, took her hand, with its bent and mishapen fingers, and held it in his own. Emily saw that he could still scarcely speak for emotion; she drew him down beside her, and looking at his drawn face, felt another flurry of remorse and doubts. Those who could not see beyond Rowland's appearance, she thought, were very foolish. Rowland McGuire was a considerable man, to whom Colin, and Colin's family, owed a debt. Who was she to judge whether he was, in her own glib phrase, husband material?

Marriage was a serious subject; love was a serious subject; the bearing of children was a more serious subject still: these issues determined the course of entire lives – what right did she have to meddle here? She was

partisan, and had in any case been too long retired from the fray; she had forgotten the agonies of love, and had no doubt underestimated them, for she was pre-occupied too often now with the more pressing concern of mortality and imminent death.

'Ah, Rowland, Rowland,' she said, laying her hand on his arm. 'I never married. I never had children. I'm old. I hadn't understood how strongly you felt. I shouldn't have spoken as I did.'

'No. I'm glad that you did.' He looked across the room. 'I can see now – I suppose I always could – Colin can offer her so much. Not just material things; I don't only mean that. Colin is generous at heart. And you're right, they are alike, in many respects. When they first met, I could see then . . . It's just that – well, I had thought – I had sensed—'

He broke off, and Emily, pitying him again, and knowing his pride, turned her gaze away from his. With skill and with tact, she diverted the conversation away from this subject to more neutral ones. Rowland, as anxious as she was to regain neutral ground before he left, followed this lead. Prompted by Emily, he began to talk of other things; Emily half listened to him, and half listened to something else.

At first, she was aware only of some shift and disturbance in the room – having lived so long in the Conrad, this was something to which she had long been accustomed. Attuned to the spirits of the building, both malign and benevolent, she could always sense when they became restless and stirred.

This they did, these days, more and more often. Emily attributed their more frequent activation to her own age, to the proximity of her own death, and to the fact that she no longer dismissed them as the products of her own fancy or superstition, as she had done in her youth.

The spirits here were always encouraged, she

believed, by perturbation in human beings. Perhaps Rowland had unwittingly summoned them up tonight; perhaps she herself had. She glanced at his now guarded, tense face, then looked down at the rug beneath her feet. It was an Aubusson, still beautiful, and patterned with faded roses; the dusky pink of these flowers, in this subdued light, darkened to the colour of blood. Tonight, these flowers, like the shadows in the room, teemed with abundant life. Emily's little dog could also sense this; she felt him stir beside her, and his hackles rise up. She concentrated on the other conversation she could now hear, which she realized had been continuing for some while, beyond and above the sound of Rowland's quiet voice. She tried to hear what was being said, in that other anterior exchange – and something was being said; she could half hear it, emanating from this carpet's warp and weft.

She began to distinguish first a man's, then a woman's voice; their words were muffled, but the reproach and pain in their voices were not. Gradually, as she listened, stroking her little dog and wondering if this message might be indirectly meant for herself, she heard that the woman's voice had come to dominate; Emily listened as an aria of accusation mounted, then faltered. There was a silence, then a long cry of uncertain gender, a cry which might have signified desolation, or delight, or distress.

'What was that?' Rowland said sharply.

Looking up, Emily realized how deeply she had been abstracted. Rowland had brought their conversation to a close without her being aware of it; he had risen, and must have been moving towards the door, when he spoke. She looked at him uncertainly, confused and surprised that he should have heard this sound, one with which she had become familiar, and which she believed to be the cry of a woman long dead. It would scarcely do to inform Rowland, a rational man, that the voice

was Anne Conrad's. He would assume that age had finally taken its toll on Emily, that she was losing her wits.

She gave herself a little shake and opted for the pragmatic answer, realizing as she did so that it could well be correct. After all, according to Frobisher, who had it from the porter, Giancarlo, Tomas Court was at present in the building; he was in the apartment below this one, visiting his former wife.

'Oh, just a marital argument,' she said in a dry way, recovering herself and holding out her hand to him.

'I wish you well, Rowland. I wish you wisdom, my dear.' She paused. 'When will you be returning to England?'

'I haven't decided yet.'

'I see.' She released his hand. Somewhere in the building a door slammed. Emily shivered.

'It's darned cold tonight,' she said. 'You'll have to take the stairs, Rowland, the elevator's playing up again.'

'I've already discovered that.'

'I dislike those stairs myself.' She huddled her shawl more tightly around her. 'Well, well, you're a good man, Rowland. I'm glad you came—'

Rowland hesitated. 'Are you all right, Emily?'

'Fine. I'm just fine. A little tired maybe.' She picked up her tiny dog, and kissed his crinkled sagacious brow. Still Rowland hesitated, suddenly concerned for her; he looked about the shadowy room and felt unease furl its wings about him.

Emily waved him away, her diamond ring catching the light.

'Goodbye, my dear,' she called after him, as he stepped out into the hall. Rowland passed out onto the galleried landing, with its brandishing arms and inadequate light. He descended the stairs, looking neither

to left or right, and left the building. Snow had been falling, he discovered, stepping out onto a thin crust of white. There was an unnatural hush about the city, and more snow would fall during the night.

XIV

'What time is it in England now, Colin?'

With a sigh, Lindsay disentangled herself from his arms; she extricated herself from the tumbled sheets and, sitting up naked and cross-legged, reached for the bedside telephone and began dialling.

'Five hours ahead of us,' Colin replied, yawning and stretching, then sitting up and kissing the back of her neck. 'I've no idea what time it is here, though,' he added, beginning to kiss each disc of her spine. 'It could be yesterday, or next week.'

'It's six-fifteen. Six-fifteen! How can that be? What happened to the afternoon?'

'Darling, what happened to the morning?'

'They merged,' Lindsay said, giving him a mischievous glance. She replaced the receiver, then redialled. 'Now we have to reform. The others will be arriving soon. We have to shower and get dressed and go downstairs and be respectable. Gini's always horribly punctual. Damn! Tom's not answering . . .'

'Tell me about Gini,' Colin said, beginning to kiss the back of her ear. 'Will I like her?'

'Probably. She's beautiful, so most men tend to like her - on sight.' She replaced the receiver. 'But I can't get Tom, and I wanted to speak to him when he flew back from Edinburgh this evening. I wanted to know he was safe. Now I'll worry about my flight.'

'No, you won't.' Colin put his arms around her.

Oxford. If there were any problem, he or Katya would have called.'

'That's true.' Lindsay's face brightened. 'I'll try him in the morning, before we leave for the airport.' His face became thoughtful. 'Colin, tomorrow we'll be in England . . .'

'I don't care where we are,' Colin said, 'as long as I'm with you.'

'You comfort me.' In an impulsive way, she took his hand in hers. 'You comfort me, Colin. I feel happy. I woke up this morning next to you – and I felt content. The day felt full of promise and prospects. I'd forgotten a day could feel like that.'

Dazzled by the expression in her eyes, and too joyful to speak, Colin drew her into his arms. Lindsay rested her head against his shoulder; he began to kiss her hair. Her use of the word 'comfort', which had surprised him, stirred some memory. For a moment he could not place it, then it came to him. 'Comfort me with apples,' he murmured, beginning to stroke her breasts. 'My beloved is mine . . . I forget the rest. Something about lilies . . .'. His body stirred, and Lindsay gave a sigh of pleasure. Her mouth opened under his.

'Darling, we mustn't, we mustn't – it's so late . . .'

'Let them wait.'

'Colin – no. We shouldn't. I – Oh God, that's not fair. We can't, not *again*. I can't go down like this. I have to have a shower. I smell of sex. Darling, stop – they'll know what we've been doing . . .'

'They'll know anyway.' Colin smiled. 'It shows in your eyes, and mine. I know that.'

'In my eyes? It can't do. Oh, yes . . .'

'It does. It's flagrant. I can see every possible declaration of sex in your eyes. Past, present, future – passive and active form. Has fucked, will be fucked – it's beautiful, and it's the most erotic thing I've ever seen in my life . . .'

'Well, perhaps if we're very quick,' Lindsay said.

'Are you still anxious, Jippy?' Markov asked, catching a glimpse of Jippy's pale face over his shoulder, in his hallway mirror. They were preparing to leave for the Plaza, and Markov was in the process of selecting a hat.

'Don't be, darling.' He turned. Jippy was wearing a neat suit that made him look like a minor accountant; Markov, moved by this, took his hands fondly in his. He hesitated. 'It will all be all right – won't it?'

Jippy did not reply. He could not explain, even to Markov, how it felt to see the aura of future events. For days, ever since they had returned from Crete, he had been afflicted by the buzzings and whisperings and seethings that signified unrest. That morning, he had woken from disturbed sleep to a sense of paralysing fear. He had watched some dark shape lumber across the room, and he had smelled evil. Evil had a precise smell, a distillation of iron, burning and salt. It was not a noxious odour, and Jippy suspected others might find it bracing, like sea air, but it left him feeling sick and lethargic, aching at his own impotence, knowing he could glimpse troubles, but that his powers were limited. The troubles, he could foresee, but could not prevent.

As yet, and as usual, the shape of those troubles were still vague; their proximity was now giving him an acute headache, for which he had already taken several doses of codeine, without effect. Standing next to Markov now, he was seeing fizzles and flashes of blinding light; he wished they would go away; he blinked.

Markov, having decided on a black fedora, turned to look at him again. When they were alone together, and only when they were alone, Markov abandoned his affectations of speech.

'I love you, Jippy,' he said.

'I l-love you back,' Jippy replied in a stout way; his stammer improved when they were alone also; Markov's

term for this shared phenomenon was the 'Certain Effect'.

'Does your head still hurt, darling?'

Jippy nodded; Markov put his arms around him. 'I make the pain go away,' he said, kissing Jippy's neck, dark hair, then stroking it. 'There – is that better?'

Jippy nodded; the pain, indeed, diminished when Markov held him.

'Well, I won't do anything to make things worse, promise you that.' Markov looked at Jippy in a penitential way. 'I won't say a word out of place – for once. Not even to Rowland, if he turns up. Is he going to turn up, Jippy?'

Jippy did not know the answer to that question, and the minute Markov released him, the sharp stabbing pain had returned to his head.

Markov opened the front door of his small, smart East Side town house.

He grimaced at the sidewalk, and then at the sky.

'Can you believe it? It's snowing again,' he said.

Further south, Rowland stood at the window of his cell at the Pierre, and looked out at the dark sky. He had showered, shaved, exchanged one dark suit for a different one, and was still irresolute. Stay or go? Risk or retreat? It was approaching seven, and he remained undecided. The scales were almost exactly balanced. On the one side was the loyalty he felt towards Colin, given added weight by the reason and dispassion of Emily's arguments; on the other were his own hopes and desires – and instincts, of course.

A decisive man, Rowland hated indecision; he despised it in others and he despised it even more in himself. He took out Lindsay's letter to him, hoping it might resolve the issue. When first read, in London, it had seemed capable of only one interpretation; now, interpretations swarmed. With a dull misery, he saw that

'We *can't* stay long. We have to be back here for dinner. This is a crazy arrangement – what if Lucien wakes up?'

'Darling, he won't. And if he does, the others will look after him. He'll be thoroughly spoiled. Don't you want to meet Lindsay's new man? I do. I'm intrigued.'

'Women usually are by that kind of thing. It bores me to distraction. I wish them well – beyond that, I couldn't care less.'

'Well, I could. I'm interested. It's all so sudden. And I'd begun to suspect she was interested in someone else.' She paused, looking at her own reflection. 'Someone very unsuitable – he wouldn't have suited her *at all*. So I'm glad she's seen sense.'

Pascal did not reply. He moved across to the window, drew back the curtains and looked out. This apartment, on the fourth floor of a brownstone on Riverside Drive, overlooked the Hudson. River and sky now blurred together; the air was thick with snow. Turning away, his manner edgy and irritable, he began to pace.

His wife watched him do so in the mirror. Carefully, she screwed two pearl ear-rings into place. She knew what was wrong with her husband, and it had very little to do with the meeting with Lindsay: Pascal was beginning to feel caged by domesticity. Once they began work on their book, this feeling would lessen, but it would not disappear altogether, and she was beginning to realize that.

'You're missing your wars, Pascal,' she said, hearing her own voice strike exactly the wrong note.

'My wars?' He gave her a sharp look. 'The wars aren't of my making; I merely photograph them.'

'You're missing them, nonetheless. Pascal—'

'I miss doing what I do best, possibly.' His tone was cold. 'Gini, we really should go. Surely you're ready by now?'

Gini experienced a tiny moment of fear. She looked

at her own face in the mirror; she felt she was stepping through the glass and watching history repeat. This was the pattern of his first broken marriage; his first wife, Helen, being informed by Gini that Pascal had decided to end his coverage of wars, had smiled a small tight smile.

'Gini, dear,' she said. 'What a victory for you! I hate to say it, but I give it six months before he reverts.'

It was more than six months; it was nearly two years.

'Pascal - you promised me . . .' she said.

'I know, I know, I know.' He gave her a long, still, penetrating look. 'You extracted that promise from me after Lucien's birth. You always have good timing.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Nothing, my darling. Just that, with marriage to you, I've realized how tenacious you are. You usually end up getting what you want, don't you, Gini?' He gave her a regretful, measuring look, then gave a shrug. Dropping a kiss on her brow, he moved to the door.

'We really must leave. Who else did you say was going to be there?'

'Just Lindsay and this Colin man. And Markov and Jippy.'

'Thank God for that. I like Jippy.'

'Do you still love me, Pascal?' She rose.

'Still? That sounds defeatist. Of course I do. You know that.' He took her hand as she reached his side and looked at her closely. 'And now you've finally made me into what you wanted, do you still love me? No regrets?'

'Of course I do.' She hesitated. 'And everyone has regrets occasionally, Pascal. They mean nothing at all.'

'Don't they? Tell me, do your regrets take a specific shape?'

'No. Certainly not.'

'Good.' Her husband's cool grey eyes rested on her face. His wife did not intentionally deceive others. he

thought, but he was learning how good she was at deceiving herself. 'Then we have nothing to worry about. An ideal couple. Destined for each other from the first.' He spoke in a light tone, feeling suddenly tired. 'We must leave, Gini. Come on – we'll be late.'

'Good evening,' Emily said, in crisp tones, to the tall man standing outside the elevator. Behind her, a maid closed the door to Henry Foxe's elegant apartment, on the tenth and top-most floor of the Conrad building. The sounds of merriment from the cocktail party beyond were cut off. Emily eyed the man and felt a spurt of gossip interest. This was her first proper sighting of Tomas Court, the ex-husband. He too had been present at the Foxe Thanksgiving party, but since he had not spoken once, and had lingered at its edges throughout, that sighting did not count.

'Going down?' he said.

Emily looked at the ceiling.

'Well, I surely can't go *up*,' she said tartly.

'No, I guess not.' Tomas Court smiled.

Emily tucked her crocodile purse under her arm and adjusted her fur, a fur which several lynxes had died to make. It gave her a wild, bristling appearance, and it had been the height of fashion in 1958. She gave Tomas Court one of her unabashed sweeping glances, and to her surprise, found herself impressed. She could see fatigue on his face, but she liked his eyes, his greying, close-cropped hair, the quietness of his demeanour, and his air of constraint.

Very different kettle of fish to the *wife*, Emily said to herself. The wife, ravishing in some pink creation, was still lingering at Henry Foxe's party. Though she had said little, and her manner was modest enough, she liked to be the centre of attention – or so Emily, unsympathetic to beautiful women, had thought. She had had Henry Foxe running around in circles, proffering

'It has got *worse*', Emily continued, with asperity, 'since your wife arrived. I have my suspicions about the elevator also. There is a definite *malevolence* in its breaking down when it does. I, of course, was the sole person on the board committee to vote against admitting your wife.'

'So I heard.'

'*Most* strange, the manner in which she obtained the other four votes.'

'Not so strange. My wife seduces people – as you've seen tonight.' His manner remained imperturbable, his tone flat. 'She made a number of donations to various causes, I understand; they happened to be the pet causes of two of your committee members, and they were large donations, but then my wife is now very rich. Jules McKechnie advised her as to which causes, I think . . .'

'Juliet McKechnie?' Emily gave a rude snort. 'I can't abide that darned woman. Never could. She's smart, however. One of *the* McKechnies – which she trades on, of course.'

'Ah, I see.' He glanced over his shoulder. 'I hadn't realized until tonight – I was confused by the name. I'd heard my wife's broker was a man . . .'

'Then you weren't far wrong,' said Emily, in a dry voice.

'As to the two other committee members,' he continued, giving no sign of hearing her last remark, 'Mr Foxe was gently wooed, but then he is widowed, and no doubt lonely, and Natasha would have seen how easily frightened he is . . .'

He paused. 'Does Mr Foxe have a daughter, by any chance?'

'He did have. His only child. She died.'

'I see. I expect my wife would have known that. She is always well-informed . . .'

His eyes moved along the shadows of the galleries. 'As for Biff Holyoake, well,

handsome face was flushed, and her grey hair in disarray; this boded ill. She opened her mouth to explain she had just met the great director, the peculiar ex-husband, and a most *intriguing* man he was, then was silenced as Frobisher gave her a beady look.

'That darned telephone has never quit ringing since you left,' Frobisher said, enunciating the words with clarity that presaged trouble. 'No way can I answer the telephone and cook.'

'No, of course you can't, Froby,' Emily said in a small humble voice.

'Problems!' Frobisher said darkly. '*Developments* - and Colin's not going to like them, I can tell you that.'

'Oh dear,' said Emily, hiding her hand behind her back.

'*Ructions*,' Frobisher said, more darkly still. 'I've been railroaded; ructions - that's what I predict . . . She looked at Emily fiercely. 'And there'll be more ructions if you keep eating my corn muffins. Put that back.'

'My lord, did you *see* Emily Lancaster's coat?' Juliet McKechnie said, in a low voice, taking Natasha Lawrence's arm, as they reached the second-floor landing of the Conrad.

'Ssssh.' Natasha laughed. 'Keep your voice down. We shouldn't be doing this, Jules.'

'It made her look like a grizzly bear, didn't you think?' Juliet also laughed. 'Magnificent, though, in her way. And she can't stand me - which is a pity. She's an old tartar, but I've always had a soft spot for her . . .'

'Why can't she stand you?' Natasha said, taking out a key and opening a small, unmarked door around the corner from the entrance to Emily's apartment. She laid her finger on her lips. 'And keep your voice *down*.'

'My grandmother snaffled Henry Foxe from under her nose.' Juliet smiled. 'This would have been around 1452.'

'I'd never have dared buy it without you.' Natasha lowered her eyes. 'I'd have argued myself out of it.'

'You have to learn to trust yourself. And you *are* learning. But you haven't been out of prison very long yet. It takes time . . .'

'Juliet, don't. Don't. That isn't fair to him—'

'If you say so.' Juliet gave a little shrug. 'But it's beautiful, Natasha. All of it's beautiful.' She hesitated. 'And you're beautiful too, darling. I've never seen you look lovelier than you look tonight.' Turning, she rested her hands either side of Natasha's face, then tilted it up, to hers. She stroked the heavy dark hair back from the pale forehead; she examined the delicate brows, the wide-set grey eyes raised anxiously to her own. Drawing Natasha into her arms, she kissed her on the lips.

The kiss, prolonged, sweet to both, became impassioned.

Natasha, with a low cry, was the first to draw back. 'Darling, we mustn't, we mustn't,' she said. 'I mustn't be too late – and he'll know. One look at me, and he'll know—'

'He's going to have to know, sooner or later.' Juliet drew her closer again. Bending forward, she kissed Natasha's throat, parted her dress a little more, and kissed each of her breasts. Then, with a dry smile and a mocking glance, she fastened the dress again and held Natasha at arm's length.

'There? You see? The picture of modesty. Brush your hair, tie it back, and he'll never know. He doesn't really see you anyway, Natasha. He sees his idea of you . . . And his idea of you doesn't include me, I'm sure of that. I was standing next to you at that party, wanting you, thinking about the other night – and he never noticed a thing.' She smiled. 'Too busy keeping a jealous eye on your sweet handsome bodyguard, I think.'

'Maybe.' Natasha gave a small frown. 'Don't underestimate him, though, Juliet. Tomas *sees* – but he always

sees from such strange viewpoints.' She hesitated
'Juliet, he's such a fine director—'

'He's a great director. I wouldn't deny that. I don't object to him when he's behind a camera. I do object to him when he's directing your life.'

'I know, I know. But – ah, Juliet, I did love him once I loved him so much . . .'

Colour winged its way into her pale face as she said this; she turned away with a sigh. Juliet watched her as she began to move about the room, with her customary grace, but with a certain agitation. She moved towards the bed, then the window, where she looked out at the falling snow. Juliet waited.

'I will tell him, Juliet,' she said, in an impulsive way, turning back. 'I've been trying to tell him for months. I've tried to prepare him, make him see I can't have him here, I can't have him back. But he won't listen to me. I say it and I say it, and he drowns me out.' She gave Juliet a sad look. 'That's what it's like. Tomas is listening to a different symphony, a different orchestra . . .'

'One he's conducting, of course.'

'I guess so.' She gave a wan half-smile. 'But give him credit, Juliet. I'm sure the music is sublime – all those instruments: flutes, cellos, trumpets, violins – music to break your heart, I expect. But I want – I want something quieter, smaller.' She gave a tiny resigned gesture. 'Just a sextet. A quartet. A trio . . .'

She gave Juliet a small glance. 'Who knows? I expect I'd settle for a duet.'

'All of those can be exquisite,' Juliet said, in a measured way, hearing in Natasha's tones something that might have been anger, or irony, or regret.

'Yes, yes,' Natasha said.

'You're an artist too,' Juliet continued, after a pause, and with some sharpness. 'He doesn't have a monopoly on art, Natasha.'

'No, no. I'm a good actor, I know that. But I'm better

he's directing me, and I'm better still when he's in the script.'

'not listening to this.' Juliet moved away to the dressing-table, and looked at herself in the glass. She pulled the jacket of her chic, dark suit, smoothed back her short, sleek, dark hair, and reapplied an angry red lipstick to her lips.

'Love you,' she said, looking at Natasha's reflection in the glass and frowning.

'beginning to love you.' Natasha paused. 'You're strength.'

'I'll give you more if you'd let me,' Juliet replied, smiling, and kissing her gently. 'Now I'm going to take a little rest off. I'll leave you with that sacred monster of mine. Call me in the morning. Will he be staying late?' 'I'm not sure. He wants to talk about Joseph King.' 'What?' 'Natasha gave a weary gesture. 'He thinks he knows who he is. He went on and on about it for hours, and I couldn't get a word of sense out of him. It makes me so miserable and afraid . . . Shall I tell you something, Juliet?'

'What, darling?'

'I tried to think – there was a time, just before I left London . . . No, I can't say this.'

'What, darling, tell me.'

'I thought Tomas was King. I thought he was sending me letters, making those calls. I don't know why I thought that; it wasn't rational. Sometimes King would come when Tomas was in the room with me. It wasn't King's voice, it wasn't Tomas's writing, and Tomas never made threats against Jonathan – but I came to associate them, somehow.' She gave a small sigh. 'I was very close to going mad, then, I think. I can't tell you what it was like. I always felt watched, overheard. I thought I'd escape once I was here. But Tomas comes, and talks to me – and he's brought it all in here too . . .'

'What, darling, don't cry. Don't get upset – look, do you

want me to stay? I will. The hell with him and what he thinks—'

'No. No.' Natasha gently pushed her away. 'I'll be fine. Angelica will be back by midnight. That nice Maria girl's coming to sit with Jonathan . . .'

'Does Tomas know that?'

'Of course not. He'd say I was smothering Jonathan – pandering to his fears. He usually says that; he says there are too many women around his son. But Jonathan wakes up and he gets frightened, so it's better if she's here. She has the key to the little door upstairs. Tomas need never know . . .'

Juliet smiled and raised an eyebrow.

'It's *easier* that way,' Natasha said, with a wry look. 'We avoid another scene. I learned the advantages of stealth two months into my marriage . . .'

'Darling. Most women do,' Juliet said.

'Catullus?' Colin said, looking down at the book of poems that Lindsay had just presented as her Thanksgiving gift. He frowned; there was a narrow silk marker to the book, so it fell open at a particular page. On that page was the love poem he had quoted to Lindsay in one of his Montana faxes. Colin gave a sigh; one diabolical eyebrow rose.

'You evil woman,' he said. 'You evil, devious, wicked woman.'

Lindsay, who was wearing her red dress and her new Thanksgiving Tiffany ear-rings, hid her smile; she gave him a meek look.

'Ah yes, Latin,' she said. 'I can read it. I had it rather drilled into me at school . . . For eight years, in fact.'

'You lied, in other words.'

'Colin, I did.'

'“Et al – I realize I do know some Latin after all”?' Colin began to smile. 'Catullus. I knew you were a paragon.'

'You can quote from my letters, Colin?'

'Why not? You've just quoted mine. Which makes suspect you read it more than once . . .'

'A couple of times, I admit. Nothing excessive . . '

'I am *immoderately* happy,' Colin said, putting book against his heart, and discovering it fit the inside breast pocket of his masterly suit.

'I love you to distraction,' he continued, moving forward in a purposeful way. 'What's more, that dress is having a very strong effect on me . . .'

'This dress? Pixie hates it—'

'What does Pixie know? From a man's point of view my darling . . .'

'Colin, no. Don't even *think* about it. We're more than five minutes late already. I—'

'Dear God, what's happening to me?' Colin said, five minutes after that. He detached himself from Linds. 'Is it happening to you too?'

'It is. Can't you tell?'

'Oh God. Yes I can.' Colin looked into her eyes. 'Aha! I can't go downstairs like this. Quick, think of something detumescent, and say it.'

'Five hours at least until we get back to this room.'

'No good. No good. That makes it worse.'

'What are nine eights? Twelve fifteens? What's a half and a half per cent of three hundred and twenty-nine? Why is the universe receding? What did Plato see in the walls of the cave? What was the name of Rochester's first wife? How many states in America? This must be working, Colin . . .'

'It's not. It's not. Stand further off.'

'What's the capital of Mozambique? Chad? Who killed Cassandra? Why? Which is the highest mountain range in Canada? What's the longest river in the world? The deepest lake? Why do I like you so much, Colin?'

'Now *that's* a truly interesting question,' Colin replied.

leading her from the room to the stairs and taking her hand in his.

'Do you know all the answers to those questions?' he asked, as they began to descend to the lobby.

'Some of them. Certainly not all.' Lindsay gave him a sidelong glance. 'I can answer the final one though.'

'Can you?'

Halfway down the stairs, Colin came to a halt. Below them, the lobby teemed with Thanksgiving celebrants. Oblivious to them, Colin turned her to face him. Tell me,' he said. 'Answer that question. We're not going downstairs until you do. Not if we have to stay here all night.'

Lindsay considered; lifting her hand, she laid it against his cheek; she began to speak in a low voice, hesitantly at first, then with growing conviction. Colin listened with absolute attention.

'Then?' he said. 'Is that true of most women? Why? You're sure? But I thought— Oh God. *God*. I can't think for happiness. Darling, listen to me—'

Colin began to speak in his turn, with no sign of hesitation, and a conviction that matched Lindsay's own. Having spoken, he leaned her back against the wall; he looked into her eyes for a long time; Lindsay laced her arms about his neck. Then, with a small sigh on her part, and a marked determination on his, he began to kiss her. This embrace, chaste, rapturous, sweet and prolonged, caused heads to turn. It was witnessed with indulgence, with envy, with nostalgia, annoyance and amusement by various guests— either because they were themselves in a similar state or because they could remember the joys and perils of being so.

It was also witnessed by Rowland McGuire who, as chance would have it, entered the lobby at that precise moment. It took him an instant to realize who this couple were; then he recognized the dress Lindsay was wearing. He turned away at once, and with some presence of

mind, attempted to lose himself in the crush of people. He had almost reached the exit, when his height and his haste betrayed him. Colin glimpsed him from the vantage point of the stairs, called his name, and hurried towards him, reaching his side before Rowland could escape.

He clasped Rowland's hands and began questioning him, his face bright. Rowland looked from him to Lindsay, who had slowly approached; he found their expressions dazed, secretive, radiant and unbearable. Mustering his self-possession, he managed an explanation so unnaturally precise he felt it could convince no-one; Colin, who had scarcely listened to it, accepted it at once.

'But that's great,' he said. 'I'm so *glad*. How lucky! You spoke to Markov? I expect he's already here. We're – well, we're a bit late. Why don't you go on through with Lindsay? You must join us for dinner, Rowland. We're going to Emily's. Frobisher always cooks enough for an army – Emily would never forgive me if you didn't come . . . No, no, don't be ridiculous. Stop *arguing*. You can't possibly spend Thanksgiving on your own. Lindsay, you tell him, darling. I'll just give Emily a quick call, so she can organize an extra place. You two go on through – I won't be two seconds . . .'

With which, Colin turned and darted away through the crowds. He had noticed neither Lindsay's expression, nor his friend's – but then, Colin was an innocent, as Emily had said.

A short while later, Lindsay found herself standing just outside the entrance to the Oak Room. She had no recollection of walking there, and she was almost certain that nothing had been said. All she could hear and see was the enormity of what was happening and the urgency of preventing it. People ebbed back and forth, separating her from Rowland, then tossing her back

towards him again. Fighting her way past a crowd of gaudily dressed women, she made it back to his side and laid her hand on the sleeve of his black coat.

'What are you doing here? Oh, what are you *doing* here?' she began. 'You have to go away – at once. At *once*.'

'I'm joining you for a drink. I've just explained why I'm here.'

'Oh God, why didn't you *call* me?'

'I've been trying to call you. For two days. I didn't know where you were.'

'Rowland – please leave. It's much better if you leave . . .'

'I won't leave. Not now.'

'Rowland – didn't Markov tell you who else was coming tonight?'

'No, why? Does it matter?'

'I think it might, yes. Rowland, listen—'

'I don't give a damn who's here,' Rowland said. 'I want to talk to you. I have to talk to you . . .'

'Now? You're mad. Rowland, let go of me. *Please* go away . . .'

Jerking his hand aside, Lindsay darted past him. She looked across the room beyond; she saw Markov and Jippy; she saw Gini and her husband. She was about to dart back out of sight, when Gini looked up and saw her. She began to smile a greeting, then the smile froze; she stared across the crowded room, her face blank with shock. Lindsay swung around to find Rowland at her side. Her agitation increasing, she began to speak; she attempted to push him back out of sight; she tugged at his sleeve; a small, frantic and undignified tussle took place.

The struggle was all on Lindsay's part; she had a confused sense of her hands plucking at his coat, and fluttering back and forth in a useless way, for Lindsay, a foot shorter than Rowland, was not particularly strong,

whereas Rowland was. He did not move by so much as an inch; Lindsay thought he was unaware of her pushings and tuggings; when he did suddenly become aware of them, he caught hold of her two wrists.

'What's the *matter* with you?' Lindsay began. 'Let go of me, for heaven's sake . . .'

She looked up. She knew then what was the matter, for the expression on his face and in his eyes could not be misconstrued. For one fleeting second, she thought that he had seen Gini; then she realized that he had *not* seen her, that he had not looked around once, that he was blind and deaf to his surroundings and that the expression on his face was caused by herself.

'I don't care,' he said, in a low voice. 'I don't care that this is the wrong time and the worst possible place. I'm not leaving until I've said this — and I'm going to say it before Colin returns—'

Lindsay heard herself make some small sound of disbelief; the noisy space filled with a tumultuous silence. Her heart began to beat fast. She looked up, met Rowland's green intent gaze, and had a brief rushing sensation of how unfairly, how impossibly handsome this man was. A figure from a romance she had been listening to since her earliest childhood. All the pain and hope and obsession of the past three years swirled in her head, and she realized that she was angry — so angry she could scarcely speak.

'Don't you dare say anything,' she said, in a low furious tone. 'Not before Colin returns. Not after. Don't you dare to say one single *word* . . .'

She saw Rowland flinch, as if she had just struck him, and angrily she shook her wrists free.

'Go away,' she said. 'Gini is here, and her husband is here. Colin is your *friend*. He trusts you. He's just . . . Oh, how can you do this? It's unforgivable, *unforgivable* . . .'

'Will you listen to me? I can explain—' Rowland

began, reaching for her hand again, but Lindsay had already dodged past him. She began to weave her way through the crush of people to their table, certain that Rowland would not follow her. She could still hear some sound, some rushing, crashing sound, like waves beating in on a beach, as she reached the table, and three men rose to their feet. She could feel the group was petrified with some collective embarrassment; she began on flurried greetings; she embraced Gini, then Markov, then Jippy. Turning to Pascal, whom she both admired and liked, she realized that he was not looking at her, but at someone else, his face hardening in an expression of anger and disbelief.

She began to turn, seeing as she did so that Jippy looked ill, and that Markov's face wore an expression of startled delight – an expression with which he always greeted incipient social disaster. Rowland McGuire was standing immediately behind her, she found, and next to him was Colin. Colin was pale with agitation; he looked as if he had just witnessed a car accident. He began to speak with great rapidity, a hunted, desperate look on his face.

'Oh, God, God,' he said, 'this is terrible. We have to move. We can't stay here. There isn't time to explain. This is a crisis, this is an *emergency*, oh, bloody hell . . .'

'Col, dear heart, *there* you are!' said a famous and melodious voice. Colin looked at the table in a panic-stricken way, as if considering diving under it. 'Too late. Oh *shit*.' He made a moaning sound, as an arm fastened itself around his shoulders. Lindsay found herself looking into a cadaverous, arresting, and very famous face.

'Col, I've been chasing you all over New York – where have you been *hiding* yourself? I've just come from the Thanksgiving bash at Tina's and Harry's. Thousands of scribes, Hollywood out in force . . . Marty was there and Michelle sent her love . . . Col. How *tremendously* well you're looking. Fit, lean, tanned. Water, water –

we'll need some more champagne over here. At your earliest convenience, if you'd be so good. Col, *great* to see you. I'm not butting in, I hope? Aren't you going to introduce me?

The speaker paused, secure in the knowledge that he needed no introduction himself. His gaze scanned the group in an expert way; singling out Gini as the only person of any significance, an expression of homage to a beautiful woman came upon his face. He held out his hand.

'Nic Hicks,' he said, unnecessarily, pronouncing his own name with humility and reverent conceit.

Lindsay, who could now hear bombs, mines and howitzers going off, sat down abruptly. Jippy stole out a hand and pressed hers in a comforting way. Lindsay looked around the table as the various introductions and greetings took place. Pascal Lamartine and Rowland McGuire exchanged a curt nod; Rowland selected a seat as far as possible from Gini and as close as possible to Lindsay. Seeing this, Gini frowned and gave Lindsay a searching look. Lindsay could see barbed wire snaking in every direction; she could see vast bomb craters opening up. Through this blasted landscape, Nic Hicks drove the tank of his ego, its gun-turret aimed at Gini, and its tracks flattening everyone else.

'Good news, Col,' he announced, glancing away from Gini for a second. 'I've been on to that maid of Emily's, what's her name? The dragon woman . . .'

'Frobisher. And she isn't a maid. She—'

'Dear heart, I'm joining you for dinner – isn't that splendid? Can't wait. Ah, the champagne. Waiter, well *done* . . . Who wants my autograph? What, that young woman over there? Of course. Tell her I'll be delighted. I'll pop over in a second and have a word. Fans!' He gave the silent group a look of humble resignation. 'Can't escape them, I'm afraid. Terrible *nuisance* – still, grin and bear it, eh? What was I saying, Gini? Oh

yes, your piece on Natasha – *awfully* good. You lady journalists terrify me . . . What? Yes, we start filming any day now . . . No, not the husband, rather a dreary role, the husband, I think . . . I'm playing Gilbert Markham – the lover. *Fascinating* character. Difficult. Tremendous challenge. Rather dark. Sensitive. Immensely complex, of course. I wasn't too sure it was *me*, but Tomas twisted my arm . . .'

From across the table, Colin caught Lindsay's eye. He put his hands around his own throat, stuck his tongue out, rolled his eyes and gave a graphic impression of a man dangling from the end of a hangman's noose. Nic Hicks, moving into overdrive, with his name-dropping rate up to three a minute and accelerating, did not notice this. Markov shot Colin a look of sly amusement; Rowland gave a chilly smile, and Lindsay, who wanted to scream or cry, began to laugh instead.

It was Jippy who finally procured Lindsay's release. He had remained silent since Lindsay's arrival, his anxious gaze moving slowly around the group, a sickly greenish pallor settling upon his face. Markov, attuned to his responses, could sense his growing agitation. He saw him look from Rowland to Pascal, and then, fixedly, at a space to the right of Pascal's chair, where nobody stood. Jippy looked at this space for some while, his expression sad; then, as if following the movements of some invisible person, his gaze travelled around the group, coming to rest upon Lindsay. Markov saw his lips move and leaned closer to him, taking his hand.

'What is it, Jippy?' he whispered. 'Try and tell me . . .'

Jippy fixed him with a beseeching gaze. His lips and tongue fought the word, and the word would not be said. It began with a 'p', Markov could hear that much; Jippy struggled.

'P-p-para—' he whispered. Markov squeezed his hand, trying to decode this. Paranormal? Paratrooper?

Parasol? Parasite? Parapet? Paradox? He could think of nothing that made the least sense. He looked at Pascal Lamartine's tense figure; he too had said virtually nothing; his cool grey gaze rested on the figure of Rowland McGuire, seated next to Lindsay. Rowland, who appeared blind and deaf, looked as if he were standing on the edge of some cliff, undecided whether to leap from it or step back. Next to him, Lindsay was making a frantic and nervous attempt to prevent conversation from flagging. She had been discussing the weather for the last five minutes, in the desperate manner of one who, if need be, could discuss its minutiae for the rest of the night. Jippy's hand gave a small jerk.

'Paracetamol,' he said, to Markov, in a low clear voice. Markov gave him a startled look, then, interpreting this as best he could he leaned across to Lindsay.

'Darling,' he said, 'I think I'm going to whisk Jippy away. He has a migraine - and it's getting worse . . .'

Lindsay embraced Jippy, to whom she had never felt more grateful, and sprang to her feet.

'We should go too,' she said hastily, looking at Gini.

'Colin, I'll just fetch my coat . . .'

Gini also rose. 'I'll come with you,' she said.

They left before anyone else could argue or intervene; crossing the crowded room, Lindsay glanced back once. She saw Rowland McGuire rise and then, in a deliberate way, move across and sit down next to Pascal Lamartine. Gini also saw this, and came to a halt in the entrance; Lindsay, agitated and distressed, caught hold of her by the wrist and pulled her into the lobby.

'Let Rowland speak to him,' she said. 'Gini, don't go back. Rowland will explain - he'll tell him he had no idea you were going to be here tonight. Oh, Gini, I'm so sorry. I'm so terribly sorry. I didn't know Rowland was coming - I promise you. I'd never have let this happen . . . Quick, let's go upstairs. My coat's in my room anyway . . .'

Lindsay ran up the stairs to the first floor, Gini following her more slowly. Entering her room, Lindsay saw with relief that the maids had been in during her absence; the tumbled bed was remade, at least. It had been turned down for the night, but two chocolates had been laid out on the two pillows, Colin's shirt was draped across the back of a chair and a pair of Lindsay's stockings was dangling from the back of another. The room still sang of intimacy, and Lindsay began to blush.

Gini followed her into the room, her manner tense. She looked at the ridiculous chocolates, the pillows, the bed. Without saying a word, she moved across to the windows, parted the curtains and looked out.

'It's still snowing,' she said, in a flat voice. She drew in her breath and turned around. Lindsay saw that her hands were unsteady and her eyes unnaturally bright.

'So – Rowland must have told you about Paris then?' she said.

'No, of course not.' Lindsay's colour deepened. 'He would never do that, Gini. I was *there*. It was obvious.'

'Was it?'

'Oh, Gini, you know how it is. One look at his face; one look at yours. Don't let's talk about this. It's none of my business. It was a long time ago . . . '

'I loved Rowland. In a way, I did. I haven't seen him since then – not once.' Gini gave a helpless gesture of the hands. 'And now – Pascal will be so furious. He's never really forgiven me, you see. It was all so *fraught*. Pascal found out – did you realize? He walked in on us in our room at that hotel . . . ' She hesitated. 'There was this terrible scene; I thought they were going to fight one another. It was I who had to decide in the end. *I* broke it off, not Rowland. Rowland was devastated. *Devastated*. And now, tonight – he scarcely said one word to me . . . '

'Please, Gini. I don't want to hear this. I – Look, I'm just going to try Tom in Oxford once more. I've been

trying to get him all evening. Then I'll have to go. She moved past her friend and began dialling. She listened to the number ringing in Oxford – it was ten o'clock in the morning in Oxford now. She let it ring, and ring, then gently replaced the receiver.

'It was all so complicated. And so *painful*. The moment of my whole life . . .' Gini said, as if there had been no interruption. Tears had come to her eyes. Lindsay looked at her uncertainly, wishing she could have reached Tom, knowing that just the sound of his voice would have eased her confusion and distress.

'Oh, what am I going to do now? What am I going to say to Pascal?' Gini covered her face with her hands. 'He can be so jealous, Lindsay . . .'

'Just tell him the truth,' Lindsay said. 'There's a simple explanation, Gini. He'll understand. Look, I'm sorry, but I must go—'

'I still don't know why I let any of it happen,' Lindsay continued, as Lindsay opened the closet and took out her funereal coat. 'I look back, and I can't understand – I must have made a decision, there must have been a moment when I thought "Yes" . . . But why? It caused so much harm. Was it just because he was there at that particular time? Maybe it was just his appearance. She paused. 'I hope it wasn't that. But he is so – so forgotten how handsome he is . . .'

'It isn't just his looks,' Lindsay turned away. 'I know now that as well as I do. Gini, don't pursue this—'

'I think I could have loved him. I said that to myself once.' Her face now wet with tears, she sat down on the bed. 'But sometimes I think that wasn't true, that it was just my excuse. I might have been *using* him . . .'

'Gini, I'm sure that's not so. You wouldn't do that.' 'It could be true.' Gini's pale face became set. 'I see, I wanted Pascal to give me a baby, and he was resisting and resisting. That hurt me so much . . .'

She made a small choking sound. Lindsay distantly

down beside her and put an arm around her shoulders.

Gini, don't, please don't,' she said. 'You'd been *ill* n. These things can happen. Loving one person esn't prevent your being attracted to someone e . . .'

Maybe it was that simple.' Gini gave her a doubting k. 'I wish I could be sure, but Pascal changed his nd after I had the affair with Rowland. He was afraid losing me then, so he gave way about the baby. rhaps I just used Rowland to manipulate Pascal . . .' e gave a small anxious gesture of the hands. 'Oh, I pe that wasn't so. I can't bear to think I did that. ybe Pascal sees it that way now. He might. Tonight you know what he said to me tonight? He said I s tenacious, that I always get my own way in the d . . .'

He said that? Gini, don't cry.' Lindsay took her hand. 'Why did he say that?'

Because I asked him to stop covering wars.' Gini ned her face away. 'I always promised myself I'd ver do that. But I did – after Lucien was born. I was afraid then. I had these terrible dreams – about ipers, mines, bombs . . . I wanted Pascal to be safe. I nted to believe he'd be there when Lucien was owing up . . .'

'That's understandable. Any woman would want that,' ndsay said gently. 'You shouldn't blame yourself for eling that way. Even if you'd said nothing, Pascal must ve known he'd have to make a choice . . .'

'I coerced him—'

'That's ridiculous.'

'That's how *he* sees it. His first wife made the very me demands, and now I'm doing it. I'm turning into second Helen. I was always afraid that would happen . . .' Bending her head, she began to cry again. 'Oh, ndsay – I feel afraid. I was sitting downstairs tonight

and I just felt afraid. I looked at Rowland, and I thought about all the decisions I'd made, and it seemed to me . . .' She hesitated. 'It seemed as if I couldn't be sure of anything. Not my own motives, not the choices I made. Nothing. I was looking at my own life story, and it seemed so *arbitrary*. Maybe I could have written it differently . . .'

'You regretted Rowland?' Lindsay said quietly.

'Perhaps. In passing.' Gini rose and turned away. 'And I felt guilty for that. I have a son now. I love Pascal. But . . .' She hesitated, then shrugged. 'Love, love, love. I've always cared about it too much perhaps. My father made sure of that.'

There was a silence. Lindsay looked at her friend with affection, with pity, and with a certain fear.

'Is that wrong?' she began slowly. 'Love matters more than anything, surely?'

'Count the crimes committed in its name,' Gini replied, her manner resigned and her tone hardening.

'You don't mean that,' Lindsay said.

'Probably not. I'm a woman.' Gini's tone became dry. 'All for love – which might be a strength, or a weakness. Tell me . . .' She hesitated, wiping the last tears from her face, then turned back to Lindsay. 'Tell me, Lindsay. Do you love Rowland? Does he love you? Is that what that scene was about tonight?'

'I don't want to answer that. I don't want to talk about it at all . . .' Lindsay rose, and began to put on her black coat. 'Please, Gini. Leave it. I'm late and I have to . . .'

'He's not right for you.' Gini made the statement in a flat way; she gave a small sigh. 'Lindsay – I have to say this. I *know* Rowland. I know him through and through, and I wish him well. I wish you well. But whatever's happened between you, you're wrong for each other. You do know that?'

'Do I?' Lindsay turned to face her friend; she felt her

heartbeat quicken, as the room became unnaturally quiet. 'Why do you say that?'

'For a hundred reasons – every one of which you know yourself.' Gini paused, then lowered her gaze. 'Not least, he'd damage you. He'd try to be faithful to you, and then he wouldn't be . . .'

'I see. Thanks. Well, that's clear, at any rate—'

'Lindsay, I don't mean to hurt you . . .'

 Gini's face became troubled. 'But someone has to tell you the truth. Just look at it from the most obvious point of view of all – Rowland should marry. He should have children. He needs a woman who can give him children . . . Not someone your age, Lindsay.' She hesitated again. 'I know that's hard, but you have to consider it – in Rowland's case and in Colin's.'

'I'd rather you didn't discuss Colin, if you don't mind.'

 Lindsay turned sharply away. 'Gini, please, don't say any more . . .'

'I liked Colin.' Gini frowned. 'He seems sweet-natured, witty, great charm . . . A bit feckless, perhaps—'

'Don't you *dare*.' Lindsay swung around, white-faced. 'Don't you dare to presume you know him. Leave this alone, Gini. What gives you the right to lecture and interfere? I'll make my own decisions—'

'Then think before you make them,' Gini replied, her tone also sharpening. 'Have an affair with Colin, by all means; have an affair with Rowland, if you don't mind getting hurt in his case, but just remember – for any man who wants a family, needs a family, you're too *old*. You can't start having babies again at forty-one. Lindsay, you're nearly forty-two – you might not be *able* to have children now. You already have a son, and I know how much he means to you . . .'

 She broke off, her troubled gaze resting on Lindsay's face. 'Rowland wants children, I know that. Does Colin?'

'I don't know.' Lindsay averted her gaze.

'How old is he? He's never been married? He's never had children?'

'He's my age. And no, no marriage, no children—'

'Ah, Lindsay.' With a sigh and an expression of concern, Gini moved forward and rested her hand on Lindsay's arm. 'Then *think*. Whatever you may feel about Rowland or Colin, you can't be selfish here; you must surely see that?'

The words were quietly said, and firmly, for all their tone of regret. After Gini had finished speaking, Lindsay could still hear them echoing and re-echoing in her head.

The words shocked her, though indeed, as Gini said, the sentiments expressed were obvious enough. She felt herself give some small, numbed gesture, as if warding the words off.

'Selfish?' she heard herself say, in a low voice.

'You can hurt someone by loving them,' Gini replied, her eyes becoming sad. She put her arms around Lindsay, and for a while the two women stood together quietly in this embrace.

It was hard to hear such an unpalatable truth from a friend, Lindsay thought, turning towards the door when she was sure that she had composed herself. She walked along the corridor, Gini following more slowly. Reaching the stairs, Lindsay looked down at the lobby, where the rest of their group was now awaiting them. With a amazed disbelief, she saw that Rowland McGuire and Pascal Lamartine were now deep in conversation, as if they had put aside their past enmity. Markov and Jippy were waiting to say goodbye, Jippy's face still white, lined and anxious. The actor, Nic Hicks, was signing autographs, and there at the foot of the stairs, waiting for her, was Colin.

Seeing his face light as he caught sight of her, Lindsay felt a surge of misery and distress. Colin could not hide his feelings for her, and had no wish to do so. Lindsay, looking at the openness of his gaze and the transparency

of his affection, felt ashamed. The last thing she would have wished to do was injure him, yet now she saw injury was inevitable – and for that, she blamed no-one but herself.

Her farewell to Gini took place outside, on the sidewalk, and Lindsay felt, as she kissed her, that it was in some ways a final farewell. She pressed her cold cheek against her friend's cold cheek, and she knew it would be a long time before she could forgive her for what she had said. Plain-speaking should not, but did, cause pain, nor was she entirely sure that Gini's reasons for speaking out were as pure as she claimed. Perhaps her motives were altruistic, but perhaps also jealousy had played a part, she thought, as she watched Gini briefly clasp Rowland's hand, then turn away without a backward look. It made no difference – she saw that with a painful clarity. Whatever had prompted Gini to speak, her arguments concerning Lindsay's age were unanswerable. However much that particular truth hurt – and it hurt very deeply – it was one which could neither be argued away, nor escaped.

XV

How long had this truth lain in wait for her? Lindsay asked herself, approaching the stairs at the Conrad. She looked at the red-carpeted stairs, with their sentinel slaves, holding up torches that gave insufficient light. She followed the flights of stairs with her eyes, as they wound up and up, and doubled back. Gini's arguments had a remorseless logic, and she could not understand how, afflicted with a peculiar blindness, she could not have seen this. Or had she seen it – and merely turned away her face, refusing to confront the issue, as she had in the past refused to confront other issues of equal seriousness in her life?

Am I infertile? I might not be infertile, she thought, looking at the red tide of that staircase. She brushed the dust of the snow from her black coat; beside her, a radiator sighed; it murmured of biology and bad timing; of statistics and birth defects. She looked at Colin, at the silent figure of Rowland, at the terrible actor, who was bounding up the stairs, still with an endless, feeble, meaningless flow of words on his lips. The men were her own age. Any one of them could hope, even expect, to be able to father a child for the next twenty years and beyond; she herself did not share this uncircumscribed fecundity, and it had never occurred to her how much that might matter until now. Redundant yet again, she thought, and although she could smile at that, the pain and rebellion in her heart were acute. She glanced over her shoulder, feeling an instinct to leave, a longing to leave; but the evening, of

importance to others, had to be endured, she knew that. Disguising her feelings with some remark, she crossed to the stairs and began to mount them. At the first landing, she heard a sound that sent a pang of recognition straight to her heart; she stopped.

'What was that?' She swung around, looking along the shadowy galleries. 'I can hear a child crying . . .'

Above her, Nic Hicks continued to mount the stairs; both Colin, who was next to her, and Rowland, who was behind her, came to a halt. They listened.

'I can't hear anything – can you, Rowland?'

'No, nothing.'

'You *can*. Listen – there it is again . . .'

Colin hesitated, then with a glance at Rowland, took her hand in his. 'Darling, I really can't hear anything . . .'

'Neither can I. Lindsay, are you all right? Colin, she looks terribly pale . . .'

'Lindsay? Darling? Darling – look at me. Christ, Rowland, I think she's going to faint.'

Lindsay heard this exchange from a great distance. The words were fuzzy and obscure, receding from her fast. A small serene catastrophe occurred: she watched placidly as the bannisters tilted, the stairs somersaulted, and the dome above her head moved in a slow and beautiful arc, coming to rest beneath her feet.

Someone caught her, as she commenced a slow, obedient, dizzying trajectory; when the world re-assembled itself and recognized its usual rules once more, she found she was sitting on the top-most stair of the first flight, with her head between her knees. From this antipodean viewpoint, she discerned that the man on her left had his arms around her, and the man on her right was holding her hand. The man on the right was somewhat calmer than the man on her left.

'Oh, God, God, *God*,' said the man on the left. 'She's ill. I *thought* she didn't look well at the Plaza.'

'Let her breathe. She's coming round. She'll be fine in a minute. Lindsay, keep your head *down*,' said the man on the right.

'Stop *pushing* her. You'll hurt her—'

'I won't. For God's sake—'

'Go and get her some water. Frobisher will give you some water, and ice. Or a key — I remember now — that's what you do. Something cold down the back of the neck. Or is that for a nose-bleed? Oh, Lindsay, Lindsay . . .'

The man on her right sighed and rose to his feet. Lindsay listened to his footsteps mounting the stairs to the next landing. There was a jingling sound. The man on her left began fumbling with her collar. Something small, cold and metallic was inserted against the back of her neck.

To her surprise, upside-down Lindsay found this ject produced a discernible effect. Its small chill aared her vision; she looked down at the red stairs, d seeing they were no longer playing tricks, slowly sed her head. She found herself looking into a pair blue eyes, alight with anxiety and concern. As she ised her head, a transformation came upon this face. 'Oh, it's worked. Thank God. I only had a Yale — this ipid little Yale. Lindsay — look at me. Can you hear e? Are you all right?'

Lindsay found she could hear him. It seemed to her tonishing and marvellous, that without a muscle oving, the expression in these eyes could alter with ch eloquence. She saw anxiety become relief, relief come joy, and joy modulate to love; the love, which oved her very deeply, struck in her some chord, for e recognized the quality of this emotion at once. It is in this way that she looked at her son; this love, qualified, poignant, and direct was always powerful — d she could sense its power at this moment. The last idual skewing of her vision ceased: the walls stood right, at right angles to the floor; the last hissings and

whisperings she had been hearing, which might have come from the radiators, although she thought not, also ceased. She had a sense that something in this interior shielded its eyes from the powers here and scurried off.

'A Yale key?' She gave a low sigh. 'Oh, Colin.'

'I know, but it was all I could find.' He paused. 'It's the key to my apartment in England. I have this sort of apartment in my father's house. The house is terribly large. It's called Shute Court, but everyone just calls it Shute . . .'

There was a silence. 'Shute?' Lindsay said. 'Colin, I don't understand . . .'

'That farmhouse belongs to it as well. It's - well, it's part of the estate, and the estate's enormous. My family has had it for four hundred years. It will all be mine one day. Lindsay, I'm rich.'

There was another silence. Colin had spoken in the tones of one confessing some mortal disease. His blue eyes were fixed steadily on hers and his face had become very pale. Lindsay wanted to weep and to laugh. She took his hand in hers.

'I think now might be the moment to faint again,' she said.

This reply appeared to delight Colin; his face lit. He drew in a deep breath, as if about to dive into icy water from some great height, and clasped both her hands in his.

'I want you to marry me,' he said. 'I want you to overlook everything I've just told you and marry me.' He paused. 'I know I proposed before, and I think I meant it then, but there's always the possibility you didn't believe me, considering a few minor factors . . . I'd never met you; I was blind drunk.'

'I'm not narrow-minded,' Lindsay said, in a reproachful way, her vision beginning to blur. 'Colin—'

'I'm not very good at proposing.' Colin gave an agitated gesture. 'On the telephone. On the stairs. I was

going to do it in two days' time, by moonlight. I thought if I did it by moonlight, you might accept.'

'I'm glad you did it here, on the stairs. I'm so—'

'Lindsay, why are you crying?'

'I'm not really crying. Well, I am a bit. I'm – taken aback. Colin, I'm touched, more than touched, and I'm honoured . . .'

Colin, who could hear the 'but' coming, lifted his hand and quickly laid his fingers against her lips. He looked into her eyes intently. 'Don't give me your answer now. I was incapacitated the first time I asked you, and you're incapacitated now. It's not really fair to propose to someone who's just fainted. No, don't say anything.' His expression became tender; he frowned. 'Now keep still. I'm going to fish that key out.'

The process of retrieving the key was complicated and took some time. Having finally extricated it, Colin held it up and looked at it somewhat sadly.

'This is yours,' he said, in a quiet voice. 'It's all yours. I'm yours. I tried to tell you that in my fax from Montana. Did you notice?'

'Ah, Colin – yes, I did.' A tear fell onto her knee. 'I wasn't sure that was what you meant.'

'If I didn't mean it, I would never say it.' He paused and gave her a sad, steady look. 'I believe I could make you happy, Lindsay. I don't have any illusions about my failings – but I know I could do that. I could make you . . . tomorrow and next year and thirty years from now. And thirty years from now, if you were my wife, I'd know I'd achieved something worthwhile in my life, and I'd be completely content. That doesn't sound very romantic, perhaps, but it's my best qualification. I would never alter, Lindsay, I promise you that.'

'Ah, Colin,' she said, turning her face away to hide her tears. 'People do alter. They alter very swiftly, despite all their best intentions . . .'

'No,' Colin said with great firmness. 'I give you my

place. It was chilly; he lit the candles, and they
glowed then began to light the entry of candles on
one. They made the corners of the room more
positive in the glimmering polished surface of the
Rowland found he could see some pale and faint
and reflection which he assumed was his own. In
still of the room, he found he felt haunted and that
if he turned, he felt he might encounter some of
self.

The last of the candles refused to light. Patient
Rowland struck another match; as it again guttered
with the candle still unlit, he became aware of the noise
for the first time. He tensed, then swung around, saw
someone behind him as close as a shadow; he found
was looking at empty space.

The voices emanated from the floor, he was almost
certain of that, but the acoustics here had an odd quality
so the voices shifted their position - now they came from
his right, now from his left. He was no sooner certain
that they issued up from beneath the parquet, when it
seemed to come from the walls, or the corridor beyond
instead.

He burned his fingers, dropped the match, and ag-
tensed. The shadows bent upon the walls: the voices
man's and a woman's, he was almost sure, whispered
past losses and future loneliness. He could hear a sound
like water; then, as he lent against the table, he
ent, the tenor of the voices changed. A new sound
began, mounting above these miserable whisperings and
drowning them out.

Rowland, less quick to identify the sound of a child
crying than Lindsay, finally recognized it. Something
brushed against his hand, and he drew back sharply, his
heart full of inexplicable grief. He found he was now
listening to silence, to a thick, hushed expectant silence.
He found he was no longer certain whether he had
identified that last cry correctly. It unnerved him, for

had been sure, so sure, that he had heard the impossible; the calling to him of a son he did not possess.

'Jonathan, try to eat your dinner,' Natasha Lawrence said. 'Please try, darling. Angelica went to a lot of trouble . . .'

Her son speared a tiny fragment of turkey on his fork, put it in his mouth and chewed. Eventually, he swallowed; he bent his head over his plate.

'Natasha, there's no point in forcing him,' Tomas Court said, in a quiet voice. 'Angelica's out. She's not going to see whether he eats it or not.'

'That's not the point.' His wife gave a small nervous gesture. 'This is our first Thanksgiving here. I planned it all so carefully. I wanted . . .'

'The sweet potatoes are certainly very good,' Court interrupted, in a pacifying voice. 'Are there any more?'

'There's heaps.' His wife rose in an eager way. 'They're in the kitchen, keeping warm. I'll get them . . .'

As soon as she left the room, the eyes of Court and his son intersected. Court laid his finger against his lips, picked up Jonathan's plate and scooped most of its contents onto his own. By the time Natasha returned, both were eating, at a steady pace.

Court, who had no appetite whatsoever, forced himself to eat everything put in front of him. He tried to fix his mind on the scene with Natasha that had to take place after dinner, when his son was safely in bed. All the while, Natasha kept up a steady flow of conversation, to which he responded with a polite murmur whenever appropriate. Both of them, he thought, could sense Jonathan's mute distress; both of them, helpless in the face of it, tried to conceal their knowledge. Court began to wish they were not alone, and that Natasha, accepting that his presence was unavoidable, had not cancelled the invitations to her other guests.

He looked around the dining-room from time to time

with a sense of dazed incomprehension. No invitation to see the apartment had been extended by his wife on either of his visits since his return from Montana; he had, as yet, seen only a few of its many rooms. He had seen a whitish hall and a white on white drawing-room where he and Natasha had quarrelled, the previous night. Now he saw this appalling dining-room, where, as Natasha had informed him, the decorator recommended by Jules McKechnie had been given his head.

The dining-room walls, at this man's behest, had been conquered a deep and not unsubtle red. The furniture, old, heavy, and acquired from God knew where, was black. Court faced his wife across a blackened expanse of oak; his view of his son was half obscured by the ranks of ecclesiastic candlesticks. At intervals around the room were modish arrangements of plants: a white orchid stared up at him from a side-table; one of Natasha's mother's orchid paintings cried out at him, open-throated, from above the chimney-piece; in the grate burned a recalcitrant, smokey, obstinate fire, which gave, and needed to give, no heat.

The temperature in the apartment was in the high seventies, he would have guessed. The air, dry and scented by candles, smelled of pine needles; it had an arid quality that caught at his throat. He was breathing with caution and with irritation, and trying to disguise this.

He found the apartment uneasy, a little schizoid and desperate. He pitied Natasha for the desperation he could read here, and he pitied his son, who had to make home in this vast mausoleum of a place. He thought of the small, ugly frame-house where he himself had grown up, a place he had not loved at the time, and from which a drive-in movie theatre two miles away had provided, in his youth, the only means of escape. Poor and cramped his childhood home might have been, but seemed to him a thousand times preferable to this. He

world; even now, the air teemed with its spirits; their hands plucked at his sleeve, begging him to give them expression and thus release. He could hear two men's voices now, arguing some issue back and forth; he could hear a woman's footsteps, pattering between them. It was in this spectral way that his movies always first came to him: the next movie but one, he thought. He looked up and returned to the red room. His wife had just risen to her feet.

'It's time for Jonathan to go to bed,' she said. 'I'll just see him up. You go through to the living-room, Tomas. I won't be long. Darling, kiss your father goodnight.'

Court hesitated, wondering whether he should suggest accompanying them. Sensing the suggestion would be refused, he rose and held out his arms to his son. Jonathan held back, his face tense and pale. He glanced towards his mother, then cannoned into his father's arms, clinging to him as he was hoisted aloft.

'Will you be here in the morning, Daddy? Will you be here when I wake up?'

'Darling, no.' Court concealed his reaction. 'I start work again tomorrow. I'll be leaving for work long before you wake up. We'll all be off to England soon, remember. Now - off to bed.' He embraced his son tightly, then passed him across to his mother, and listened to their footsteps retreat. He returned to the white living-room, where another stubborn fire smouldered; he kicked at its greying embers and it flared briefly into life.

He picked up the briefcase he had brought with him, with its faxes and photographs, with the documentation that had been pouring in now for a day and a half, and which had to be shown, and explained, to Natasha that night. Where should they sit when he embarked on this explanation? This question, a trivial one, refused to be dislodged. He looked at the room as if it were a set; he adjusted the lighting; he moved an irritating feminine

match, and this perhaps accounted for his feeling, intense since he first entered this place the previous day, that his perceptions were skewed. It was not his perceptions that were to blame, he told himself, what was wrong here was the *space*.

On Hillyard White's drawings, this corridor had run through the centre of the apartment like an artery; now he could see that the corridor, although arterial, was neither centred, nor straight. It angled around a corner that should not have been there; to his immediate right was a wall where there should have been a room – could that room have been bricked up?

He looked at the wall in question, and at the odd sweaty sheen achieved by some specialist paint effect; hung upon it was a picture by Natasha's mother he had always greatly disliked, in which a man's hand grasped the stem of some white and repugnant flower. The picture was askew; irritably, he moved to straighten it, then drew back, with a low exclamation and a sense of dread. A sound was coming from behind the wall, a dry, persistent scratching sound, as if something were clawing at the plaster, desperate to get through, desperate to get out. Court, who had grown up in a farming community, recognized the sound instantly as that of rats.

As a boy, he had shot rats for his uncle in one of his barns; he was paid a nickel a dozen, and the task was one he disliked. It was not easy to shoot the rats, for they were fast and agile; their death throes, prolonged, acrobatic and squirming, were vile yet fascinating to watch. It was difficult too, to collect up the bodies: he had a superstitious fear that one rat might be shamming, that it would rise up and bite him as he stooped. Also, he discovered, the live rats retrieved the dead bodies of their fellows, and did so in a bold, knowing way, even as he approached. He had never been able to decide, nor could his uncle inform him, why they did this: did they give their rat brothers honourable burials – or

did they eat them? He stared at the wall, sweat breaking out on his brow, and all the fears of his childhood rising up; the scratching continued for some while; then, abruptly, it stopped.

'Would you like me to read to you, Jonathan, or shall I tell you a story?' Maria said, as Natasha's footsteps retreated into the distance. A door closed. Maria, plump, bespectacled and familiar, switched on the night-light. Jonathan found her comforting – not as comforting as his parents or Angelica, but comforting nonetheless.

Maria's speciality was fairy stories, of which she had a vast repertoire. In the past, she had told him the story of Hansel and Gretel, and the Babes in the Wood; of Red Riding Hood, of Rapunzel, Cinderella, and a Sleeping Beauty cursed in her cradle by a wicked godmother who was also, Maria said, a witch.

Maria's witch performances were convincing, and Jonathan had enjoyed them at the Carlyle, in company with Angelica. He felt less sure he would enjoy them here. He was discovering that the Conrad was never quiet; there was always some alarming sound, some creaking or inexplicable slithering, just as he was about to fall asleep.

'We could look at my new animal book,' he said, a little uncertainly. 'Daddy gave it to me for Thanksgiving.' He paused. 'Daddy's downstairs now, with Mommy. He may come here to live with us, I think.'

'Well now, wouldn't that be cosy,' Maria said.

She plumped up his pillows, smoothed back his hair, picked up the book and made herself comfortable on the duvet next to him. 'My oh my,' she said, flicking the pages with great rapidity, 'will you look at that.'

Jonathan looked at her curiously. Maria did not seem very interested in the pictures, although she had removed her glasses – the better to see them, she said. Jonathan had never seen her without thick and

flattering lenses and now he did, he found her eyes
old. They were set too close together and they had
yellowish glint. He thought Maria's eyes had always
been brown – dark brown; he said this.

'Brown, blue, green . . .' Maria shut the book. 'Contents.
All the colours of the rainbow. You can buy eye
a store, these days. Any colour you like. Didn't you
know that?'

'I guess so . . .'

'Fat, thin, dark, fair, pale, tanned . . .' Maria laughed.
These days it's easy. A woman can be anyone she wants
magic, Mr Sharp Eyes.' She gave Jonathan's arm a sharp
snatch.

Jonathan did not like the way she said that, and it
snatched hurt. He gave her a doubtful look. It would
have surprised him if Maria were capable of magic;
thought of her turning up at the Carlyle to give
another her pre-theatre massage, with all her little bottles
special oils. These oils were magic, she had told him
once, and when he had told his mother, she had smiled
'Well, magic in a way, maybe,' she had said. 'They smell
nice, and they make me relax.'

He sniffed. Maria smelled faintly of her own oils now
he thought, and he could recognize some of them, the
herby scents, lavender and rosemary; beneath them
rough, and not quite masked by them, was another, less
pleasant odour, that might have been blood or sweat.
Maria smelt nervy, twitchy; he laid his hand on her da
veve.

'Are your special oils magic, Maria? Do you make
them up yourself?'

'I surely do. Mix, mix, mix.'

'What do you put in them?'

'Eye of newt and toe of frog. Slugs and snails and
happy-dogs' tails – that's what little boys are made of
gar and spice and all things nice . . .' She made a
gurgling sound. 'I had a little boy once. You know wh

happened to him? He was growing away in my tummy – you know babies do that?’

She turned a yellowish eye towards him; Jonathan gave her a scornful look. ‘Of course I know that. It’s in all my books. Human babies stay there for nine months. With small animals, it’s much shorter, and with big ones like elephants, it’s . . .’

‘Well my little boy didn’t stay there nine months, M Smart-Ass.’ She pinched him again. ‘My little boy was in there *three* months.’ She prodded her stomach. ‘He just had time to grow all his fingers and toes and his ears and eyes – and then you know what? Some doctor came along and sucked him out, scraped him out, hoovered him out. Then they put him in a bucket because he was just so much *mush*. Red mush. And they wanted to hold him, but they said I couldn’t do that . . .’

Jonathan had frozen still as a mouse. Something was badly wrong with Maria tonight; it was not just the horrible things she was saying, it was the way in which she said them. She kept opening and closing her mouth like a fish, and gasping for breath; her mouth was an ugly, jagged shape. She had now started to cry, but she did not cry as his mother did, quietly, making no sound; the tears coursing down her cheeks; Maria cried noisily with her face all twisted up. Jonathan did not really want to touch her, but he knelt up in bed and put his arm around her shoulders.

‘Maria, don’t cry. Please don’t cry.’ He put his hand over his ears, and tried not to think about red mush and a bucket.

‘Maria, shall I get Mommy?’

‘No, don’t do that.’ She stopped crying as suddenly as she had started; she smiled instead. ‘I’m OK. It’s just I miss him sometimes, my little boy. He’d be five years old today. You could have played with him, like a little brother – you’d have liked that. Now lie down. I’m going to tuck you up.’

Jonathan wanted to argue, but found he was too afraid. He climbed back beneath the covers and lay very straight.

'Now you go to sleep, you hear me?' She leaned over him very close, so her yellowish eyes had a squinty look, and he could smell something sour and pepperminty on her breath.

'I will, I will,' Jonathan said. He tried not to think about peeing, because he found he wanted to pee, urgently and badly, but he was afraid to tell Maria this. He made a small wriggling movement, then lay still. Maria took his hand in hers; one by one, so it hurt a little, but not too much, she started bending his fingers back.

'And I want you to stay nice and quiet. No calling out when I'm watching TV. I'm going to watch TV now, and I don't want my programme interrupted. You know what I'll do if you start playing me up?'

Jonathan shook his head.

'I'll open that closet door in the hall. And I'll let the bogeyman out. His name's Joseph, and I'll send him in to deal with you. You won't like that. You know what he does to naughty boys, little know-alls like you?' She gave him a long, still, yellowish look. Leaning over, she yanked the bed-covers off. 'He eats them up. He eats their fingers and their toes and their ears, all the bits that stick out - they're his favourite bits. Then he bites off their little wee-wees, so there's a big hole, and he sucks and sucks, and all their insides come out, all their heart and lungs and liver and lights, and he swallows them up like soup. Slurp slurp.' She laughed. 'Sleep tight, precious,' she added, and switched out the light.

Jonathan lay there in the dark, too afraid to move. He wanted to pee very badly now. He told himself there was no such thing as the bogeyman, and there was nothing in the hall closet except sheets. Then he found he could hear footsteps dragging along the corridor; he

could hear the TV and he could hear footsteps . . . He peered into the dark, clutching at his bear, and the dark moved like eyes. He made a small whimpering sound, and the warm urine came gushing out in a flood. It felt comforting at first, but then it began to feel cold; he listened and listened, but the footsteps seemed to have stopped.

He wondered if Maria was really watching TV, the way she said. If she was, she would have her back to the door and her back to the corridor. He thought if he was very very quiet, and avoided the floorboards that squeaked, he could creep past her and she would never know. Then he could run downstairs to Mommy and Daddy, and they'd be angry with Maria and she'd never come back.

Very slowly, he inched the bedcovers aside. Clasping his bear, he crept to the door and looked out. He could hear the TV again, but the door to that room was closed. He inched past it, pressing himself against the wall. His pyjama bottoms were wet and clingy, and he felt cold and shivery; he inched a little bit more and a little bit more: past the sitting-room, past the bathrooms; he could see the light was on in his mother's bedroom, and the light was spilling out through the open door into the corridor ahead.

He crept towards the patch of light and then stopped, too afraid to go on and too afraid to go back. Maria was in his mother's room, where she had no right to be. He could hear her muttering and talking to herself; she was doing something to his mother's bed; he could hear some horrible ripping, grunting sounds. He could just see Maria's upraised arm and something bright and sharp in her hand, then she bent and grunted and disappeared round the edge of the door.

Sweat ran down into his eyes; he opened his mouth to cry out, but he only made a little sound, some dry squeaking sort of sound. Maria was panting now and

groaning, and that made him more afraid. He had heard noises like that before, a long time before, coming from his mother's room, and when he had gone to help her, there were his parents, naked in bed. His mother's head was tilted back over its edge, her hair rippling down like water, and his father was on top of her, gripping her wrists, moving to her cries, rising and falling, rising and falling, his face sharp and gleaming, rhythmic as an axe.

'Daddy?' he said in a low voice. 'Daddy are you there?' The door instantly swung back. His father was not there, and when he saw what Maria had done to his mother's room, he started to cry. He slid down the wall in a little pool of misery and fear, not daring to look up.

'Just in time, just in time,' said Maria, crouching down beside him. She jerked his head up. 'Now we can really have some fun, precious,' and she showed him the knife.

'Are you worrying about the time for some reason, Natasha?' Tomas Court said, catching his wife in the act of easing back her sleeve and checking her watch.

'No, no,' Natasha replied, 'I'm listening, Tomas. It's just - I thought I heard something. I was wondering if Angelica had come back early . . .'

That possibility did not please her husband. His face tight with annoyance, he crossed the room and went out into the corridor. His wife folded her hands on her lap. It was ten-thirty; Angelica was not due back for another hour and a half. She looked at the briefcase on the table, and the mass of papers inside it which her husband had been about to take out. She knew the subject of Joseph King could be put off no longer, and the effect, as she had predicted to Juliet McKechnie, was to heighten her nervousness.

The slightest sound now made her tense. For the past thirty minutes, in a hopeless way, she had been trying to think of some pretext to leave the room, go upstairs, and check that Jonathan was safe. She knew this was

unnecessary; Maria knew about his nightmares; if any problems arose which she could not cope with, Maria would summon her. All the same, she longed to be in the same room as her son, to see with her own eyes that he was at peace and soundly asleep.

It angered her that she could not bring herself to leave the room and risk her husband's certain irritation if she did. She knew she was still subject to the tyranny of her husband's moods, but she also knew that if she risked angering him, he would stay even longer. He might pick a fight with her again, as he had done the previous night and if angry, or desperate, he might then attempt to make love to her. He had been very close to doing so yesterday, but Angelica's presence in the apartment had, finally, inhibited him. The knowledge that her guardian was not there to protect her tonight, made Natasha excited and fearful. If Tomas began to touch her, or to kiss her, she might begin to want him again. What would the consequences then be? Then she would be admitting Tomas, and all the chaos he brought with him, back into her life.

'This precious apartment building of yours is infested with rats, d'you know that?' he said, returning to the room and picking up the briefcase. 'If you stand in the hall, you can hear them scratching around. What's behind that wall? Heating ducts? You should talk to the super—'

'I don't think it's rats, Tomas,' she said, in a quiet voice. 'There's some service area for the elevator behind there. It opens through into the elevator shaft. It's just machinery noises, cables, draughts . . . I'll mention it to Giancarlo though, just in case.'

'Fine. Then let's continue. You need to hear this.' In a weary way, he drew out a sheaf of papers. 'Most of this came through yesterday and today from the investigation agency. If I'd waited for the police to make those checks it would have been six months before we

got the results. As it is, once the agency had something solid to go on, they made progress.' He paused, looking at her as she sat huddled at one end of the white sofa. 'I once knew Joseph King, Natasha, and so did you. Do you want to see a picture of how King looked then, when we first met?'

He tossed a photograph towards her. In silence, Natasha examined it. The picture, in black and white, showed a group of people eating lunch around a table; the setting appeared to be a movie location. She examined the picture, recognizing no-one in it.

'The third from the left. Fair hair.'

Natasha swallowed nervously. 'But that's a woman, Tomas,' she said.

'A woman. Precisely.' He crossed to the sofa and sat down next to her. Natasha, looking at his white set face, realized that he was exhausted; she could hear now that his breathing was stressed. Quietly, she held out her hand to him and he took it in his own.

'Her name then was Tina Costello,' he continued. 'She's had a great many names since. That's some of the crew on *The Soloist*. She worked in Make-up. Assistant to an assistant to an assistant. So when I say you knew her, I'm exaggerating. You'd have passed her, maybe said, "Good morning" – no more than that. She was aged twenty then, and studying at UCLA on some movie course. I hired her as a favour to the third assistant director, who said she was his cousin. I spoke to him today, at length. It turns out she wasn't his cousin. He denies it, but he was screwing her, I expect.' He paused, looking away. 'I fired her – or someone fired her on my behalf, six weeks in. There'd been complaints from the Make-up department: time-keeping problems, general incompetence. I've never given her a second thought until she turned up yesterday at the door of my loft in TriBeCa.'

His wife bent her head over the photograph. From

nothing here for a week. Just that flurry of calls when the decorators were here . . . Nothing since. You saw her *yesterday*. You *met* her? Did you talk to her for long? Did you recognize her?

'No, of course not. She looks totally different now. I wouldn't have remembered her, in any case.'

'And yesterday she told you that she'd worked for you in the past?' Panic had come into his wife's eyes and her hands had begun to tremble. 'Tomas - I don't understand. No woman would do this. All those years; the *work* she put into it. She'd have to be so obsessed to do that. Did she have a grudge against you because you fired her? Is that it?'

'Who knows?' He looked away. 'She's obsessed with *work*. She isn't sane. Her motives don't interest me, I just want her and her brother found. I want them locked up, and I want them out of my life. That's it.'

'I can't bear this.' With a sudden despairing gesture, his wife rose and turned to face him. 'You're lying, Tomas. Why do you do that? I know you so well. I can tell when you're lying - something happens to your eyes and your voice . . .'

'Natasha, don't pursue this. Let it be. It's irrelevant now.'

'Irrelevant? I don't think so. You'd better tell me, Tomas. Which of them was it? The girl, or her brother? They could have been either, we both know that.'

'The girl.'

'You slept with her? When we were making that movie? Then? But Jonathan was only a baby then. I ought—'

'Then. At my apartment yesterday also. And sleeping isn't involved. Natasha . . .'

'Ah, dear God, I'm still jealous.' She turned away, covering her face. 'I still can't bear it, even now. In your apartment? Some woman who'd turned up out of nowhere? Some woman you didn't even *know*?'

She snatched at the pile of papers he had indicated, tossing aside sheets of print. Coming upon the right picture at last, he saw her face change. She gave a sharp intake of breath.

'Is this a joke?' She stared at him. 'There must be some mistake . . .'

'No. No mistake.'

'But I know this woman. Tomas – you met her one day at the Carlyle with Angelica.'

'I never met her. What are you talking about?'

'Glasses. She wears glasses usually. Maria. The one who used to give me a massage before I went to the theatre – once a week, twice a week sometimes—'

Under her left breast, Court heard; he stared at his wife.

'Oh, dear merciful God. She's upstairs,' she said in a low voice. 'She's upstairs, with Jonathan, tonight.' He saw her face become blank with fear, then she turned and ran from the room. Court followed. Halfway along that narrow artery of a corridor, pain tightened in his chest. He slumped back against the wall, fumbling for his inhaler. When the pain eased, he began opening doors, calling his wife's name. He found himself in a kitchen, where a machine threshed. He found himself in a laundry room, where a tap dripped in a white sink. He opened another door and brooms fell out at him. Then he saw the right door, the only possible door – a jib-door, small, wallpapered, disguised and well-nigh invisible.

He forced it back and began to mount the stairs. His wife began screaming before he was halfway up.

'They locked her up,' Frobisher said, coming towards the end of a ghost story familiar to everyone present except Rowland McGuire and Nic Hicks. She produced some mince pies, dusted with sugar and fragrant with spice, placing them in the centre of the table.

'That's why she still *walks!*' Emily put in. 'Confinement! She couldn't be confined then – and she *still* can't.' She shivered. 'That woman had a lust for blood.'

'Em, please. *I* am telling this story. We will tell it *my* way, if you please. Now, shall I continue?'

Everyone at the table except Lindsay gave some form of assent.

'As I was saying . . . The Conrad brothers locked their sister up – for her own safety, or so they told the staff. The room they kept her in is just under this one.' She glanced down. 'That apartment is a duplex – the only one in this building. The room was tucked away up some stairs, so no-one could hear her if she cried out. The Conrad brothers told everyone that Anne had left for Europe on a visit, and all of their friends accepted that . . .' She paused. 'Although there was gossip, wasn't there, Emily?'

'Indeed yes. Tongues wagged. The Conrad brothers were rich – and strange. So there had *always* been talk.'

'Be that as it may,' Frobisher continued, lowering her voice, 'their precautions were to no avail. Every night, one of the brothers would stay with her; they took it in turns to do that. And one night, one of the brothers got careless . . .'

'*I* heard,' said one of the ancient women whose identities Rowland confused. '*I* heard that the brothers quarrelled and one of them let her out . . .'

'Possible. In the circumstances, even probable.' Emily glanced around the table. 'They were all so very *close* . . .'

'Either way,' Frobisher continued, doggedly, 'a fatal error was made. Her door was left unlocked. She ran down to that great drawing-room, in a white muslin dress . . .'

'*Blue*, Froby. I always heard it was blue.'

'*White*, Em. A white dress – in fact, a kind of nightgown – and her black hair all loose. She was a very

beautiful young woman, no dispute about *that*. It was a summer's morning. The shades were down against the heat, but the windows were wide open. There was some kind of struggle – the brothers tried to subdue her, or so they later said. She broke free of them, gave one last terrible cry, and she jumped. Or . . .’ Frobisher paused, giving the assembled company a dark glance. ‘Or, she was *pushed*. That possibility was whispered at the time . . . But pushed by whom? The elder Conrad twin? The younger? By both? History does not relate, alas. And naturally, the whole matter was hushed up afterwards. Though people did say—’

‘She was with child?’ Another of the ancient women asked, on a gentle, interrogative note.

‘Six months gone,’ Emily said, in a brisk way. ‘Six months gone, my dears. And her skull cracked open on the sidewalk right outside the entrance. Cracked open like an egg.’

Lindsay made a small sound. ‘Poor, poor child,’ said the third of the old women, glancing towards her. ‘Such a terrible thing. Tell me, Emily – was she truly mad, do you think?’

‘North north-west,’ quoted Emily in a sage way. ‘When the wind was southerly . . . And at what point did she *become* mad, if she did? One cannot be sure, since it was the brothers who took charge of the story afterwards. As is generally the way, of course.’

A silence fell in the room; a candle guttered; Lindsay felt Colin's hand reach for her own under the table. Rowland stared fixedly at his plate. Nic Hicks, having been silenced by Frobisher's story for the first time that evening, passed the mince pies, then took one himself.

‘A rat, a rat . . .’ he said, taking his cue from Emily's quotation, and acknowledging this with a charming glance. ‘So, who was the secret lover? One of the brothers? Does history relate that?’

it does *not*,' Emily replied in a huffy tone. Hicks never noticed when his knuckles were; he pursued his point. 'But what *happened* to the uous brothers? I'll bet they came to unpleasant

...
u are correct.'
scinating.' Hicks sighed. 'You know, Emily, it ds me of the first production of *Hamlet* I acted in. ratford – a million years ago now, of course. My days. I was straight out of drama school, playing

...
xcellent casting,' said Colin, under his breath. r Peter directing, wonderful Hal in the title role n as Ophelia. She played her pregnant! Visibly se e mad scene, and when she was brought in on the – well! Unmistakably *enceinte*. This very, ver d belly – a *huge* gasp from the stalls. *Ruined* th eyard scene – such a scandal! A *cause célèbre* night! Letters to *The Times*, professors up in arm uairy feminists jubilant, needless to say ... Of cours were *packed* out every night ... Six years later, whe s playing Hamlet myself, with Gwen as my Gertrud rribly good, I thought – I said, "Let's get o crities *straight*. Concentrate on the prince. Honou indecision!" I'll never forget, on the first night, Tre

...
et me out,' said Colin in a low voice only Lindsa ld hear. 'Please God, let me out *now*. I can't stan more of this.'

as he spoke, he suddenly remembered an intentio losed in one of his Montana faxes. Unspeakabl gs! Gently, he released Lindsay's hand. Turning t Hicks with an expression of profound interest, h ped his freed hand beneath the folds of Lindsay' skirt. He began to move it gently upwards. He coul l the top of her stocking, then the skin of her inne gh, which was astonishingly smooth and soft. H

sighed. Lindsay, who had spent the dinner shu between dismay and despair, became aware o intent, thoughtful gaze of Rowland, seated immedi opposite her. She gave the straying hand a caress, a small and desperate pinch.

'I gave my daughter a Shakespearian name,' sai quiet and melancholy voice of Henry Foxe, seat her immediate left. 'Marina. I called her Marina. a lovely name, I always thought.'

'A beautiful name,' Lindsay said gently, feeling wash into her heart. Henry Foxe had shown her a pi of his daughter before they came in to dinner. daughter, dead a decade, was tonight much in thoughts, he had said.

'It's a pun on mariner,' Rowland said, making Lin jump. 'In the play, that is.'

'Is that so? I didn't know that.' Henry Foxe ga small sigh. 'Well, that would make sense. It's f *Pericles*, my dear.' He turned back to Lindsay. 'V rarely performed. I'd never seen the play, never rea I did read it finally, when she was a little girl . . .' gave a small dry sigh. 'Of course, as Mr McGuire know, in the play, there is a happy ending. The daugl is not dead, as her father has believed. She has b rescued from the sea by pirates. So she returns from dead.'

He paused. 'It is a very moving scene, when the fat and daughter are reunited, when they recognize c another at last. Such a strange play - a corrupt tex believe. Am I right, Mr McGuire?'

'You are. Yes.'

'There are lapses elsewhere in the play - but th scene, I always feel, is most beautiful. The daughter si to her father, you know, and of course, he beg to recognize her because she so resembles his de wife . . .'

'Their identities elide,' Rowland said, his eyes resti

upon Lindsay. 'As is the case in many of the best of course.'

'Such a beautiful scene.' Henry Foxe repeated, shaking his head. 'Such language! One is robbed, in the modern world, of such language. That scene was my mother's favourite in the entire canon. An unconventional choice. Perhaps that's why I chose the name for my daughter. How odd. I'd never thought of that possibility until tonight.'

He gave another little dry sigh. Lindsay, pitying him, found she could think of no adequate reply. She felt her eyes swim with tears. She laid her hand quietly on his arm, and Henry Foxe, not looking at her, patted it. Lindsay rose, and with a few whispered words to Colin, left the table, finding she could no longer bear to be in this room with its eddying undercurrents, its ghosts and its griefs.

'Hi, it's Tom,' said her son's familiar voice. 'Katya and I can't take your call right now. But leave a message after the tone, and we'll call back.'

Lindsay, sitting on the bed in one of Emily's guest-rooms, stared at the wallpaper. It was yellowish, old, and formal in its patternings. Some device marched away towards the corners, another marched upwards to the cornice. She had received no reply from Tom's room when she called from the Plaza at eight; she had received the answerphone, less than an hour later, when she had called from this room before they went into dinner. This fact had refused to lie still in her mind ever since; all through Frobisher's meal, she had felt an irrational and mounting anxiety - and the turn the conversation had taken had made that anxiety worse.

'Tom, it's me,' she said, into the phone, trying to deaden the panic in her voice. 'I left a message earlier. Darling, are you all right? I'm - I've been worrying

about your flight. Tom, if you're there, will you pick up? I know it's late but . . .

The machine cut her off. Lindsay replaced the receiver. To hear her son's voice, yet be unable to speak to him, made the panic much worse. She rose and began to pace about, then sat down on the bed again, trying to calm herself.

Frobisher had piled everyone's coats on the bed as they arrived. Lindsay could see her own new illicit black coat, a scarlet scarf that belonged to Nic Hicks, some terrible bristling bear of a thing that belonged to Emily, a moleskin cape affair that one of the three ancient friends had been wearing, and lying side by side, virtually identical, the two dark overcoats belonging to Colin and to Rowland. Lindsay looked at these coats and heard herself make a strange sound, half gasp and half sob.

Oh, what am I going to *do*? What am I going to *do*? she thought, rising again, and again pacing about. She looked at her watch, and found it was almost half-past ten. She tried to work out what time that meant it must be in Oxford, but her mind refused to do the sum. It went washing back and forth in a mad futile way, seeing problems at every turn. Oh why did Colin go on the stairs? she thought, then, telling herself the location was unimportant, her mind went rush-off in another direction. No matter what she did now, thanks to her past actions, others were going to be hurt. Was there some way of preventing that? She could see no such way, no route out. There would be some damage to Rowland, she was not sure how much, and there would be considerable damage to Colin. I must *extricate* myself, she thought. I must take action and I must *plan*.

As she found she could not plan, because she had looked at the telephone: her anxiety for Tom had come flooding back, and all she could think of now was the necessity, the *urgency* of hearing his voice.

There she was, as she had always been — a poor helmsman, charting a desperate, erratic course across an interminable ocean, always believing that land would be sighted soon. At sea: the story of my life, she thought.

A sound came from the doorway behind. 'I'm sorry. I didn't realize you were in here,' said Rowland McGuire's voice.

Lindsay dropped the coat guiltily and stepped back.

'I didn't mean to interrupt. I just came for my coat, Lindsay. I have to leave now, and—'

'You're not interrupting. I was just trying to call Tom. I've been worrying about Tom for some stupid reason . . .'

'You weren't calling Tom then.'

'No. I was — thinking.'

This remark met with a silence — a silence which clamoured to Lindsay. Rowland picked up his overcoat and slowly put it on. Lindsay, afraid to look at him, could feel the tension radiating from him. She hoped he would remain silent; she hoped he would speak.

'I went to Oxford to see Tom yesterday,' he said, finally, turning to look at her. He hesitated. 'He'd left for Scotland, so I missed him. I — Lindsay, I went there because I had this fixed idea in my head that I had to ask Tom's blessing before I spoke to you.' He gave a sigh, looking away. 'Now, I don't even know why I felt . . . at. I went as soon as I received your letter. Your letter was delayed, you see. At the time, it seemed important to do that. Now it seems obtuse.'

'Rowland, no — ' Lindsay took a step towards him. 'You mustn't think that. *Not* obtuse . . .'

'I really couldn't have borne it in that dining-room for another second,' he went on, in a quiet voice. He glanced towards the door, then rested his green eyes sadly upon her face.

'I couldn't hear what anyone was saying. I was trying

to understand how much all of this was simply a matter of chance, accident – mistimings, especially on my part. I kept trying to convince myself that if I stayed, the right might suddenly come right. Then – something someone was saying – I realized: better absent myself. I couldn't have been here. I shouldn't have come to York. My presence has already caused enough trouble for one evening, and I don't want it to cause any more, especially for you . . .'

He hesitated, then moved into the doorway. Lindsay shed the light from the corridor glance across his face. She could see the strength of emotion he was struggling to conceal, and her heart went out to him. A great surge of words rose up within her; she said his name and began to move quickly towards him. Reaching his side, she realized that none of those words could be said.

'I wanted to know—' He broke off, taking her hand. 'Did you understand my letter, Lindsay?'

I didn't then, but I do now. Rowland, I'm so sorry. I'm so desperately sorry—'

'My love.' He caught her against him, cradling her head in his hands. He began to kiss her hair, then pressed her tight against his chest. Lindsay listened to the beating of his heart. Everything she had never said to him, and everything she had ever hoped he might say to her, were expressed then. She felt, in the confusion and flurry of that brief embrace.

Gripping her by the arms, he drew back and looked down at her face.

'Yes or no, Lindsay – just tell me that.'

The question had been torn from him. Lindsay would have said that he had not intended to ask it and regretted it the instant the words were said. No fear of disloyalty could be read in his face. To the question there was a rich fund of answers she would have stored in her heart. Three years of answers and

explanations and revelations never made; she consigned them to oblivion.

'No,' she replied, in a low voice – and she admired him then as much as she had ever done, for although the recovery was not instant, it was courageous and it was swift.

'Ah, I feared you would say that.' He stopped, fought to control his voice, then continued. 'Lindsay you will always be very dear to me, and I wish you nothing but joy. I want you to know that—'

He embraced her gently as he said this, drawing her into his arms in a quiet protective way. Lindsay found she could not see for sudden tears. She found that, as once before in Oxford, she was encircled by his arms, and her face was resting against his chest.

'If you were wearing that green sweater,' she said, in a shaky voice, 'I'd kiss it now, Rowland . . .'

'Never mind. You can kiss my tie instead.'

Lindsay kissed his tie. She was just thinking how much she liked the patterns of this tie, how sensible and orderly they were, and how calm she felt, when someone began screaming. It was a woman, and the sound was painfully close. The cry was repeated, then repeated again, on a mounting note of terror and distress.

Colin was halfway along the corridor when he too heard this cry. The corridor in Emily's apartment, as in that of Natasha Lawrence's below, ran like an artery from the reception rooms at the front of the building to the bedrooms at the back.

In the dining-room, halfway along this corridor, there had, for some while before, been sounds that indicated disturbance, trouble and distress.

For a while, still seated at the table, Colin had been deaf to them. To his right, some interminable conversation between Emily and her three ancient female friends had begun; it concerned the current vagaries of

the elevator. Colin had been deaf to that too; the whole of his mind dwelt upon Lindsay – to such an extent that he scarcely noticed Rowland rise and speak to Emily in a quiet voice. It was only when Rowland came around the table to him that he had realized he was leaving; he half rose, but Rowland immediately pushed him back towards his seat.

‘No, really, Colin. I’d rather see myself out. I don’t want to break things up, and I have to go—’

‘Don’t be absurd. Let me see you out . . .’

‘Really.’ Rowland’s expression did not encourage argument. ‘I’d rather slip away. I have an early plane to catch. My thanks for this evening—’

He turned and left. Slowly, Colin sat down again, puzzled by Rowland’s expression, tone and haste.

‘The override switch, Emily dear,’ one of the ancient women was saying, and Colin, scarcely hearing her, began to feel a sick unease. Something was happening, he felt; something *had* been happening, and he had been blind and deaf to it. But what was it? What was it?

He could sense some dark and shapeless idea at the back of his mind, and he knew he had been given clues, that he could see this thing if he concentrated, if he dragged it forward into the light. But the thing would not move, and was almost instantly occluded by another, more pressing thought. Colin began to realize that Lindsay’s telephone call was taking too long, that she had been absent too long. Could she have felt faint again? And why had Rowland chosen that moment to leave? It was then that the sounds from below, apparent for some while, finally registered. He heard the running footsteps, the slamming doors, the woman’s voice calling, at exactly the same moment that anxiety for Lindsay gripped.

‘Is something *wrong*, Emily?’ One of the ancient women suddenly asked. ‘My hearing is not perfect but . . .’

'I can hear someone crying,' said Henry Foxe, becoming very pale and rising to his feet. 'Emily, it sounds like a child crying . . .'

'What's that *banging*?' Frobisher rose with a look of alarm. 'It's coming from the stairs. Is some door being forced? Colin, I think you should—'

Colin was already running from the room as she spoke. As he reached the main corridor, he heard the scream, rising up from below his feet. He froze, feeling the cry reverberate up through his body. His heart had started hammering; he glanced along the corridor, to his right and to his left. To his right, he saw nothing; to his left, he half saw in a bedroom doorway some shape which should not be there, which could not be there, and which he knew he had to be imagining. From beyond the front door, straight ahead of him, a renewed, confused clamour broke out. He could hear a frantic, metallic, banging sound, some broken protest, the cries of a child in obvious distress, then the sound of a man's voice – a voice he recognized at once. No, dear God, please no, said this voice, and Colin found he was across the hall, through the door, and out in the shadows of the landing.

It was of the utmost urgency and importance to be there, he knew that, even as he also knew that it was of the utmost urgency and importance to remain in Emily's apartment, where he could look again at the two people – yes, it had been two people – who had been standing together in that doorway to his left.

He peered along the galleried landing, trying to see past its riot of pillars, trying to make sense of its shapes. Ahead of him, that red carpet poured itself down the stairs; above him, other galleries whispered and cried out alarm. He could hear doors opening and closing; he could sense a terrible, gathering collective fear: something had been let loose in this building – but Colin's mind refused to tell him what it was. He heard Emily's

voice from the corridor behind him, then some cry from one of the old women. He fixed his eyes on the landing, and found he could see some flaming white shape, moving beyond the pillars: the shape was the size of a child; it was airborne: it had too many arms, and there was something that appalled him about its face.

'Lindsay, stay *there*. Colin, what's happening?' Rowland said, from behind him, and that banging and crashing and anarchy burst out again. Of course he was not surprised to hear Rowland's voice, Colin thought; of course he already knew that Rowland had not left; of course he also knew why Rowland had remained. He had seen him with his arms around Lindsay. He had been shown the unthinkable, the unimaginable and the impossible just now, in that bedroom doorway to his left.

How stupid of me, he thought. How unbelievably stupid. How could I not have seen something so obvious? A dull pain settled itself inside him; looking along the galleries now, he found the pain steadied his vision and comprehension had come. He saw a simple tableau – father, abductor, child – which made clear and immediate sense.

'Oh, my heart – let me sit down. I can't breathe,' said a voice from the hall behind him. Glancing back, he saw Emily being helped to a chair, Rowland bending over her with a look of concern, and Lindsay running towards him.

It seemed to take her an immense time to approach. Years passed while he looked at her pale uplifted face. He knew she was saying something, but her words would not transmit their sense. He said something to her – he was never sure afterwards what it was, but it was probably something about the police, about calling the police. He thought maybe he told her to keep the door *closed*; he certainly slammed it, and he thought he said that.

As soon as it was shut it was very clear to him what

he had to do next. None of this was really happening, but even so he had to help the child – so he began to run along the gallery towards the child, and the man grasping the child, and the figure slumped against the bannisters, breathing painfully, who, he realized, was Tomas Court.

As soon as he moved – and only seconds had passed, but they felt like years – the man holding the child stopped scrabbling and banging at the elevator doors and ran off. He was still clutching the child, like some pale bulky parcel, and he still had his hand clamped across the child's mouth. Colin could see the child's hands plucking at air, and he felt outrage and incomprehension at this. He paused only for a moment by Tomas Court. Then, seeing he could scarcely breathe, let alone pursue, set off in pursuit himself. He expected the man to run down the stairs towards the entrance hall; but, since nothing was obeying the usual rules, he did the opposite and started to run up. Colin followed, running at speed, stumbling, then running again. His heart was now pounding; the man had a head start of almost two flights, and as he ran Colin had a clear sense that this was all a dream, and at any moment he would wake up.

'Stop, stop, stop,' he heard himself shout in this dream, and it struck him how absurd this was. Even so, he cried 'Stop' several times more. He changed it to 'Please, stop' on the sixth landing, which was even more absurd, and 'Don't, please, *don't*' on the eighth. He found he was saying something garbled and incoherent to a tiny, frightened, wizened, ancient face which popped out from behind a door on the ninth floor, but the door then slammed, and the bolts were drawn across. In his dream, Colin could then concentrate on what really mattered, which was making his legs move faster, and getting the air into his lungs, which were starting to seize up.

Reaching the top floor at last, he had a glassy sense that it was not a dream, after all, but that everything was now going to calm down; normality was about to prevail, no-one was going to get hurt, and the child – he realized the child must be Tomas Court's son – was ing to be safe.

He had a *reason* for thinking this, he saw, stepping into the landing and slowing his pace. The abductor, he could now see, was not a man, but a woman. He could see why he had made that mistake: the woman was wearing trousers and her hair was hacked raggedly short. He could also see that she was holding a knife – that he found he was not alarmed by the knife. A woman must be as incapable of hurting a child as he was of hurting a woman: this creed it did not occur to him to doubt. He felt totally sure that the instant the woman saw he did not intend to hurt her, she would give him the child and surrender the knife. Fighting to steady his breathing, he began to walk towards her.

'You're frightening him,' he began. 'He's only a little boy and he's terrified. Please, put him down. You can't want to hurt him. Give me the knife . . .'

The woman had been scratching and banging at the elevator doors. As soon as he spoke, she made a panting, grunting sound. She darted away, across the landing, which was large, and backed up against the bannisters. Colin hesitated; there was a sheer ten-storey drop behind her. He felt a vertiginous fear then; his shocked calm began to fragment; the floor began to move, and the dome tilted above his head.

'Precious, precious,' said the woman, and cut the child's face.

Blood welled; Colin looked at the blood welling up in disbelief. She had cut the boy just below the eye, very close to the eye; blood welled up and dripped down over her fingers, which remained clamped over the boy's mouth. Colin saw the child give one terrified convulsive

movement, then fall limp. He could both see and sn his terror now; he could also see that the knife, a lo thin switch-blade, was pressed up against the child's b throat.

'Oh, dear God, what are you doing? What are y *doing*? You *cut* him,' He stared at the woman. 'Yo how can you do that? You can't want to hurt a ch It's so wicked, *wicked*. Please – give him to me. I'm going to touch you, or hurt you. Let him go. Let him *at once* . . .'

'He stinks. Filthy little know-it-all.' The won spoke in a low rapid voice, eying him. 'You take c more step and I'll jump.' She frowned. 'I'll cut throat.'

'You can't do *both*. What are you *saying*? Lo please – listen to me. Why are you doing this? Wha the *point*? You can't get away from here now. Th elevator isn't working. Every resident in this buildi will have been calling the police . . . Please, give him me.'

He stopped. He could hear just how stupid and fata inadequate he sounded. He could not understa why these arguments, so true and so obvious, wo not be properly expressed. He tried to look at t woman; think, *think*, said some irritating, confusi voice in his head. He began to see that the woman w very afraid; her face had a twitchy, jittery look; she w breathing in and out very fast and beginning to shal Colin took another step forwards. He wanted to ma a rush at her, a grab at her – but the knife was j under the boy's ear, and that ten-storey emptiness l in wait.

'Precious. Precious baby,' said the woman, in a l crooning voice. She looked down at the boy; Co risked another silent step forward. Her head jerked and the white of her face flared at him.

'Do you have a baby?'

'No, not yet. Look – *please*. Let me help you. You need help . . .'

'Call the elevator. Tell Joe to bring the elevator *up* . . .'

Colin was afraid to move away to the elevator. If he did, he would be at a greater distance. She might jump.

'The elevator isn't working,' he began. 'I told you – it won't come. It's broken down. Listen—'

'I had a baby once.' Her eyes flashed at him. 'Didn't I, Jonathan? Where's my baby now? Flushed down some drain. Tossed out with the trash.' Her mouth moved. 'Get the elevator. Get the fucking elevator, right now, or I'll jump.'

She made a jerking movement and the child gave a moan of fear. Colin's heart leaped. He started to move towards her fast, because he suddenly saw with absolute clarity that if he did not act now, and act quickly, the unthinkable was going to happen right in front of his eyes, and fifteen seconds from now the boy would be dead. I'm going to *kill* her, Colin thought, moving, propelled on sudden violent rage, and realizing that he *could* kill her, if only he could get hold of her before she used the knife.

'Get the elevator, Colin,' said Tomas Court's voice. 'Get the elevator now. Do what she says.'

Colin stopped dead. Tomas Court had spoken sharply; he was standing on the far side of the landing, at the top of the last flight of stairs. Colin stared at his white face. He decided he was going mad; surely there was no way in which Court could have recovered and made it up those stairs? Yet there Court was, breathing quietly, if with obvious pain. He paused for only a second, looking at the woman and his son, then he began to walk towards them, his hand held out.

'Jonathan, don't move,' he said in a quiet voice. 'Just stay still. Colin, get the elevator, please. Now, Maria – do you want me to call you Maria? I don't think of you

by that name. I think of you as Tina. I always will, and always have – if you'd said yesterday that your name was Tina, it would have made all the difference. Didn't you realize that?'

The use of this name had a magical effect. The woman became still; she stared at Court and made an odd, gentle sound in her throat. Colin found he could breathe again. He darted across to the elevator and summoned it in the certain knowledge it would not come. Hope winged through him; he knew this was the correct thing to do, because Tomas Court had instructed him. Court knew this woman; he could *reach* her in a way Colin could not. Disaster was about to be averted, Colin thought. Two men against one woman was no contest, in any case. He could now see every frame of this movie playing itself out; it was a movie he'd seen a million times; it had a kindly director, who ensured that the hero disarmed the assailant, or, failing that, resolved everything quickly, without bloodshed, after a brief and well-choreographed fight.

At any moment, Tomas Court would give him a *signal*, Colin thought. He'd stop talking and give him a signal, and the two of them would launch some effective, concerted male attack. He moved back towards Court, who was still speaking. He found the scene in front of him would not stay still, but kept jerking about; he found Tomas Court was not only ignoring his presence and failing to give him any signal, but saying things that made very little *sense*.

'Didn't you get my messages?' he was saying, in a quiet, puzzled way. 'All those messages I sent? I don't understand why you're doing this. You must see – I can't talk to you now, not with the boy here; he's in the way. Look at me. Tell me you got those messages, Tina. Tell me you understood.'

The woman's grip on the boy slackened for a second. Her mouth moved. 'Messages?' She stared at Court in

a mesmerized way. 'I sometimes thought – when I was alone . . .'

'I can understand that.' Court had finally come to a halt a few feet in front of her. Colin edged his way to Court's side. He could see that Court was looking at the woman with tenderness and with regret.

'Don't be afraid,' he went on, in a quiet voice. 'Trust me. I'm not going to touch you – though I want to very much. All this time . . .' He gave a sigh. 'You know not one day has gone past without my thinking of you? I've read your letters a thousand times. I know them by heart. There's one you wrote—' He hesitated. 'And I keep it next to my heart.' He sighed. 'How is it you know me so well? You're closer to me than anyone I've ever known. I can talk to you without any fear of being misunderstood – and you can talk to me the same way. That's how close we are.' He held out his hand to her. 'Put the boy down, Tina. He's in the way. You're so very dear to me. Give me the knife.'

The woman began to cry. She cried in a heart-rending way, Colin thought, making ugly, gulping sounds, and twisting her face. Colin found he pitied her, and that Court's quiet words, for all their obvious effectiveness, made him uneasy. They were familiar to him, but he could not place them; recently, he felt, he had heard, seen, or used words that were very similar himself. He shifted his weight from his right foot to his left; he had some vague, nasty sensation of evil, breathing quietly, standing close.

'Hate you,' said the woman, glancing down. 'Hate you, hate you, hate you . . .'

'Of course.' Court glanced towards the knife; it had moved a little, but not, Colin thought, enough.

'Don't *always* hate you,' she added, in a low voice. An expression of irritation passed across Tomas Court's face. As soon as the woman saw it, she made a low,

moaning, anxious sound. Hope, and fear, flickered across her face.

'You know what I want, Tina?' Court fixed his pale gaze on her. 'I want you in my arms – and at this moment I want that more than anything else on this earth.'

'Lies.' The woman's eyes flashed at him. 'Lies, lies, lies, *lies*.'

'No. The absolute truth.' Court's pale gaze did not waver, but again that expression of irritation passed across his face. 'I'm not arguing with you, Tina. If you want to hurt me there are more imaginative ways of doing it than this. When I tell you to put him down, mean it. Now do it.'

'Shan't.' She stared at him. Court, to Colin's alarm, gave a sudden shrug and a look of dismissal.

'Fine,' he said coldly. 'Fine. You're boring me. Jump.'

Colin stared at him in stupefaction. He heard himself make some low sound of fear and protest. 'Oh, *Christ*,' he said, starting to move forward, because he could see the woman's expression altering, and he could see her starting to turn towards that ten-storey drop. She lifted the boy high in her arms, and Colin knew that she was about to throw him. The child gave one terrified cry. Court did not move, and as Colin lurched forward, the woman dropped the boy at his feet.

Colin made a grab for him; he got his arms around him and started to scoop him up. Neither Court nor the woman had moved, Colin thought, and he could sense that they were looking at each other, that their gaze, which he could feel rather than see, was interlocked. He gripped Jonathan more tightly, and the instant he touched him, the boy began to fight. He was half-crazed with fear, and the fear gave him strength. Colin was straightening up with the boy in his arms, trying to back away, to get him out of the woman's reach, and the boy was *fighting* him. It was like trying to hold an armful

of fish. The boy threshed and squirmed; he rained down punches and slaps on Colin's head and face. He sank his teeth into Colin's hand, and as Colin tried to catch hold of his arms, he began to kick and scream. He caught hold of Colin's hair, and tugged at it. 'Jonathan, Jonathan,' Colin said, trying to calm him, trying to get him out of the woman's reach and away from that ten-storey drop. The boy rose up in his arms, arching and yelping. For a moment Colin could see nothing but his flailing arms, and that moment was all it took.

Darkness moved; something clattered to the floor, and somewhere to the side of him, something bunched. Over the boy's shoulder, past his white face, Colin saw Tomas Court enfold the woman in his arms. He knew that was all right, because he had heard her drop the knife. He started to tell Jonathan this, that it was all right, that he was safe, that it was over – but Jonathan was still yelping and screaming and trying to scratch his face.

Colin ducked his head away; he heard a crunching sound, then a sharp exhalation of breath, and he began to realize that some blow had been struck. He started to turn, and heard himself make some sound, of fear, of protest. 'Daddy, Daddy, Daddy,' Jonathan cried, and Colin froze in horrified disbelief.

He watched the woman move upwards and over the bannisters with a gymnast's grace. She went over backwards, head first, in a beautiful dive; he saw her eyes widen and her hands grasp space. She seemed to hang there, supported by air, for an immensely long time, then she disappeared from sight. Tomas Court stepped back from the bannisters. He brushed at his jacket – one sleeve was torn; he stood listening, white-faced.

There was a silence, then a faint, thin cry, then a thud. Colin, shocked, appalled, unable to move, did not need

to look over the bannisters to know what had happen he knew she was ten floors down on a stone floor, she was dead. He began to tremble violently; he for he had begun to weep. The little boy, sensing so change, made a whimpering sound, lay still and cover his face. Colin cradled him tightly against him ; stared at Tomas Court, whom he could scarcely see listress.

'Why? Oh, dear God, *why?* Tomas – she'd let I go. He was *safe*. Tomas – she was this poor, m pathetic thing. Oh, *Christ*. You hit her. I heard you er . . .'

'I did not hit her. Colin, I tried to take the knife fr er. She was struggling – I don't know what happen One second I had hold of her, the next she was toppl over. These bannisters are deadly; they're not ev waist-height . . .'

'Ah, dear God, you *pushed* her. You lifted her up a pushed her over . . . I can't believe – Christ, *Christ* . There was a silence; this silence, to Colin, was very lo t was filled with clamour and movement and cryin out. He buried his wet face against the boy's hair. Tom Court put his hand on his arm; Colin flinched and h he boy tight.

'Colin,' Court began, in a quiet voice. 'Colin, you n shock. Wait until you're calmer before you speak doesn't matter what you say to me, I understand – l what you say matters very much when you talk to t police.'

'She believed you.' Colin raised his eyes to Cour All those things you said to her – all those *lies*. S believed them. This awful mad *hope*. Tomas, she iven me the boy, she wasn't dangerous any more. C why did you touch her? Why did you *lie*? It v horrible—'

'Much of what I said was true as it happens.' pasm of pain passed across Court's face. 'Colin, you

not thinking clearly. I told her what I knew she wanted to hear. What else was I supposed to do?' His voice had begun to break; Colin saw that he too was now beginning to tremble, that his face was drained of colour, and that the love he felt for his son was naked in his face. 'Colin. I'm grateful to you for what you did, you're a good man, but – just give me my son, Colin . . .'

Colin looked down at the boy, now curled in his arms in a foetal position. He kissed his hair, then lifted him into his father's arms. Court clasped the boy tight against his heart, and began to say his name over and over again, in a low voice. Colin saw the boy slowly begin to move. He made a small mewling sound, and scrabbled at his father's jacket, then stole his arms about his neck.

Colin's vision blurred. He found he was blinded by tears, and by the force of his own emotions. He rejoiced that the boy was safe, but his rejoicings were shot through with fear and with doubt. He thought: I heard the knife *fall*; I heard it fall *before* he touched her. The knife fell and *then* there was that embrace.

The knife was lying on the floor, he realized; it lay several feet away from the bannisters, and its position told him nothing. He stared at it, and as he stared, the sequence of events, so clear to him only seconds before, began to shift. He found he was not certain of sequence, of cause and effect. Had the knife really been dropped *before* the embrace? And why did he think of it as an embrace anyway? It might, as Court claimed, have been a struggle of some kind, a contest for the weapon. He stared at the area of the landing where these glimpsed events had occurred. He found they were now receding from him fast; they were as fragmentary as the details of a dream, forgotten on waking. The harder he struggled to recall them, the ghostlier and more insubstantial they became. They were impressions only, and

Tomas Court was correct: a muddle of impressions should not be imparted to the police.

He swung around to Court, suddenly wanting to ask him again why he had put his arms around the woman and what that embrace *meant*. Court was now huddled against the far wall, stroking his son's hair and speaking to him in a low, soothing voice. He did not look like a murderer; an embrace could mean so many things, Colin thought.

He turned away; he was beginning to see why this one question so preoccupied him. He was still almost sure that he had seen Court embrace the woman, and he was absolutely sure that he had seen his friend Rowland with his arms around Lindsay in a bedroom doorway – and now, with his whole heart, he wished to believe that both embraces were innocent. Concentrate, concentrate, he thought. He looked at his watch and found an impossibly short length of time had passed since he had slammed the door of Emily's apartment. He looked up at the dome, then down at the floor. Neither were securely themselves. I understand *nothing*. I am certain of *nothing*, he thought.

He moved towards the bannisters, gripping them tightly, and looked down. The air came rushing up at him. He began to understand that, for some time now, the Conrad building had been stirring, and coming back to life.

He could sense its pulse now, and its intakes of breath. He found he could see a shape on the floor below, arms flung out, and a stain spreading. A man he knew was bending over that shape, and he could see people, emerging, merging, and milling back and forth. He could see a woman in a red dress, standing to one side at the foot of the stairs; his heart, in whose promptings he retained faith, told him this was the woman he loved and wished to make his wife.

He watched the man bending over the body rise to

his feet with a shake of his head; he watched the woman he loved turn away and cover her face with her hands.

This is happening and it is not happening, Colin thought, as he watched Rowland gently put his arm around Lindsay, and hold her against him for the second time that night.

XVI

At four the following morning, Colin and Lindsay were finally able to leave the Conrad. They stepped out of the building into a hushed, near-silent Manhattan. The snow on the sidewalks was unbroken; there was a serene high moon, and each limb of the trees in Central Park was frosted silver.

'Oh, let's walk, Colin.' Lindsay took his hand. 'Let's walk. How quiet it is . . .'

'You won't be too cold?'

'No. I need air and silence. And you must need them far more than I do.'

Colin was indeed desperate for both. He took her arm in his; they crossed to the far side of the avenue, and began to walk south. Colin listened to the crunch of their footsteps; he glanced back at the trail they left in the fresh snow. Snow was continuing to fall, gently, as they walked, and it was already beginning to fur and obliterate the marks of their feet. Much preoccupied with death that evening, Colin thought of death as he walked. He and Lindsay were the same age – how many years or decades had they left? It was so important that they should waste none of this future time, he thought. He hoped they would be granted many years, but for all either of them knew, the time allotted might be short.

He could hear the wheels of Time's winged chariot very clearly tonight, but he heard them, he found, without fear. They concentrated the mind wonderfully; he drew Lindsay's small cold hand into the warmth of his overcoat pocket and clasped it tightly. He wondered

if Lindsay could sense his thoughts, if she felt something similar. Looking at her quiet face, he felt that she might.

As they walked, the unusual quietness of the city began to calm him; he allowed his mind to consider the events of that long strange night. He thought of his still-unanswered proposal, of a death he had now decided *was* accidental, of the labour of his interviews with the police; the more accurate and factual his replies to their questions had been, the less accurate they felt. He still was not sure of the dead woman's name, he realized. He had still been trying to piece together her story and her connection to Tomas Court, when he had learned that she had an accomplice, and that *this* accomplice had been found when, at Tomas Court's suggestion, the tiny service room off the elevator *shaft* on the first floor had been searched.

A man – perhaps her brother; the police had seemed as uncertain as Colin – had been found. According to

of Colin's informants, he had been in a delusional e. According to another, the man, freaking out, had ally been yanked out of the tiny room gibbering about sts.

So – was *he* Joseph King?' Colin had asked Tomas urt, as they sat together between police interviews.

No.' Court had given him one of his still, pale looks. o, he was just her medium, if you like. He killed that rist in Glacier. It was he who attacked me at my loft t time but his sister planned it, I think. Colin, don't rry about the details; they're not important, and they n't concern you. Let it go. Just tell the police what u saw and heard tonight.'

Colin looked around the room where they were iting. Its light was too bright. There was a clock on e wall which Colin refused to look at. He had a strong use that he and Court were outside time, outside place. ere, he found, he could ask Court *anything*, and Court ould reply without evasion or deceit.

'Do you feel free, Tomas?' Colin had looked at his white, strained face with concern. 'Do you feel free – now she's dead?'

'Free?' Court considered; the concept of freedom seemed unfamiliar to him. 'No, not really. I had hoped I might, but I can't erase the tapes, or forget those letters she wrote. I listened to those tapes once too often.'

'I heard a bit of them.' Colin coloured. 'That night with Thalia, at your loft. They were still playing – and I couldn't find the switch-off mechanism . . .'

'Really? I usually used a remote.'

'In the end, I couldn't bear it any more. I just ripped the tape out of the machine. That stopped it.'

'Did it?' Court gave a half smile. 'And do you still remember what was said?'

'No, not really. I did for a bit, but it's worn off now. It was just pornography anyway . . .'

'Just pornography?'

'All pornography's the same.' Colin coloured more deeply. 'It's repetitious. I hate things like that.'

'“The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom—”'

'What?'

'William Blake.' Court gave a sigh. 'It was one of King's favourite quotations, that. There were a lot of quotations . . .' He turned and gave Colin a still, tired and affectionate glance. 'What a good decision I made when I hired you, Colin.'

'I don't see why.' Colin sank his head in his hands. 'I've been a fucking disaster as far as I can see. I couldn't find you the right Wildfell Hall. I spent weeks sitting around saying “but”. And tonight, I tried reasoning with a mad woman. I kept saying “please” and “don't do that”. It was the most fucking pathetic thing I've ever heard in my life.'

'I wouldn't agree.' Court frowned. 'I could hear what you were saying as I came up the stairs. I knew it

wouldn't work, but that wasn't the point. To the pure in heart, all things are pure – and besides, I think it had some effect. After all, she didn't stab Jonathan; she didn't jump; so maybe she did listen to you after all . . . ' His pale eyes rested on the wall opposite. He sighed. 'You used the word "wicked". It's years since I've heard anyone use that word in its proper sense. Ah well.' He touched Colin's arm briefly. 'You're a very good location manager, Colin. Let's leave it at that.'

Court had said nothing more. Colin had completed his police interviews, but had not seen Court again that night. In a state of glassy and unnatural calm, he had returned to Emily's apartment. There, he found Lindsay and Rowland waiting for him. Nic Hicks, to his relief, had already left; Henry Foxe had returned to his own apartment, it seemed, once he was sure that Emily's collapse in her hallway was not, as had been feared, a heart attack.

Emily, Frobisher informed him, had been put to bed and was now asleep. Her three ancient indistinguishable friends, meanwhile, were preparing to depart. They had wanted to wait, it seemed, until Colin came back. Why they should have wished to do this, Colin could not conceive, since they seemed remarkably unconcerned as to that night's events. The eldest and frailest of the three was virtually blind, Colin realized, as she kissed him goodnight; all three lingered, and all three were *still* twittering on about the elevator.

'The override switch! Such a *useful* device!' the eldest cried, fiddling with her gloves. 'Do remember it on another occasion, Frobisher dear. My sisters and I were shown how to use it by our father – a little trick he taught us when we were girls. All you need is a very *small* implement, dear; nail scissors will suffice. You open up the control panel, flick the override, and up you go! Most useful tonight, for dear Henry's party. Ten flights of stairs, which we could *never* have toiled up.

Dangerous in the wrong hands, of course . . .'
She paused. 'Do *you* know anything about hydraulics systems, Mr McGuire?'

Rowland, silent and abstracted, started. 'No, no – I'm afraid I don't.'

'Ah well. Goodnight Mr McGuire. Lindsay, Colin . . .'
With which, they wrapped themselves in their ancient moleskins and glided out. And Colin, finding himself alone with Lindsay and Rowland, had discovered that he knew what he had to do next.

'Rowland, could I have a word with you alone?' he said.

Lindsay at once rose, consternation on her face. She had been about to protest, Colin feared – but perhaps his determination communicated itself to her. She glanced from one man to the other, then, saying she would fetch her coat, quietly left.

The door closed behind her. As if from a great distance, Colin considered his friend. Rowland had risen, and his discomfiture was evident. Colin saw he was finding it difficult to meet his gaze, and this puzzled him for a second. He was not angry with Rowland, he realized. He did not feel angry, or jealous, or confused, or betrayed. He simply felt calm – and armed. Excalibur was in his hands, he thought.

'I have to say this, Rowland, and I have to say it now,' he began, in a quiet voice. 'There's been enough confusion and uncertainty tonight—'

'I wouldn't argue with that.'

'I didn't realize until just before I saw you together in that doorway.' Colin sighed. 'That must seem stupid to you – but it wasn't stupidity. It wasn't even that I trusted you, so it never occurred to me you might lie. It was just that I was so happy, I couldn't see beyond the happiness – I think it was that.'

'Colin, I regret this more than I can say. I want to explain – I'm entirely at fault here . . .'

'Rowland, you're my friend.' He paused. 'I know you won't have done this lightly.'

'No, I did not.'

'You had three years, Rowland. You've known Lindsay three years. You could have acted at any point in those three years – and you didn't. Tell me why not. Was it her age?'

'Partly.' Rowland looked away. 'Also—'

'Tell me.'

'Colin, I wasn't in love with her. I looked on her as a companion, a colleague, a friend. I came to love her – and that process, well, it had never happened to me before. I wasn't sure it was enough. I was very afraid of making a mistake and hurting her. I wasn't sure of her feelings either. Colin, I'm sorry. I can't discuss this.'

So when did it change? In Oxford – that lunch?'

No, before. When she spoke to you on the telephone Yorkshire; maybe before that. I thought of her, when I was away in Scotland. Colin, I don't know . . .'

'You wouldn't make her happy, Rowland.' Colin gave him an anxious look. 'I think you'd end up making her very unhappy. If I thought you'd make her happy, and on doing so, I'd walk away from this myself – I promise you that. I'd remove myself from the scene with as much grace as I could muster and I'd go off and lick my wounds in private. I'd hate you for a bit, obviously. But that would wear off.' He paused, his blue eyes resting on Rowland's troubled face. 'But I would do it, Rowland. You see, I love her very much.'

'I can see that.' Rowland's expression hardened. 'And now I'm supposed to act in a similarly noble way, is that the idea?'

'It's not noble. It's sensible.'

'Since when has sense had anything to do with love?'

'It's the right thing to do.' Colin's gaze also hardened. 'I'm asking you, Rowland, to walk away from this. If you won't . . .'

He sighed. 'If you won't, I'll fight you.'

every inch of the way, with every weapon at my disposal. But that would be the end of our friendship, and I'd like to avoid that.'

There was a silence. Rowland turned away, with a sudden dismissive gesture.

'Your request is immaterial, as it happens,' he said, 'as Lindsay made very clear to me tonight.'

As always, Colin thought, he disguised pain and uncertainty with curtness, with coldness; even when making an admission of defeat, Rowland could sound arrogant. The reply, which ought to have given Colin joy, did not. Looking at his friend, his calm and certitude began to ebb away. He could not believe in Rowland's rejection, he realized. Why would any woman turn Rowland down? In Colin's experience, no women did, and this had never really surprised him, since he loved his friend, and admired him without reservation himself.

He looked at Rowland, so gifted in so many ways, not least in his looks, and suddenly he saw the hopelessness of his own case. Whatever Lindsay might have said to Rowland, it seemed inevitable to him that, faced with a choice between the two of them, she would choose the better man. He himself had no weaponry at all, he thought, except love – and now, it seemed, Rowland could also give her that.

But for how long? Colin thought. Not – and of this he remained utterly certain – not for long enough.

'Rowland,' he said, 'please leave her be. Let her love me. I believe she could.'

'Are you totally blind?' Rowland gave him an angry glance. 'Use your eyes, Colin. She already does.'

'What?' Colin said, staring at him, unable to believe his ears, feeling the beginnings of joy, of a most wonderful hope. He felt himself begin to blush – an affliction he had never been able to cure.

'Oh, God, God,' he heard himself say, discovering he was beginning to pace about. 'Do you mean that? You

really think that's true? Could it be? Why? Why? Rowland, you can't possibly be right – what could she see in me?"

'God alone knows,' Rowland replied, frowning, then beginning to smile, as if despite himself. 'You're bloody impossible, but presumably it can't be that. According to Markov, it's your hyacinthine hair. Oh, and your Apollonian body. That famous way you have with women . . .'

'What? What are you talking about? I don't have a way with women – I never did. What's an Apollonian body, for God's sake?'

'I'm not too sure. Maybe it's your vast wealth. Have you told her about Shute?'

'Yes, yes – but it won't be that. It has to be something else. No, I think you've got it wrong, Rowland . . . Oh, God, God. I'm going *mad*. I was just starting to *hope* . . .'

Rowland hesitated. He gave Colin a long and considering look. With a sigh, he put his arm around his shoulders and pushed him towards the door.

'Colin, I shouldn't keep her waiting any longer if I were you. You'll find out the answers to your questions in due course, no doubt.' He paused. 'Are you sure you haven't been given them already?' His voice became dry. 'As you may imagine, I was paying close attention. I'd have thought you'd been given your answers, Colin – judging from the way Lindsay was looking at you tonight.'

Colin turned to look at him. Their eyes met, and Colin, who had never felt more grateful to Rowland than he did then, gave him a troubled look.

'I think that sometimes,' he said, in a quiet voice, 'sometimes – I have no doubts. She knows that I love her, of course . . .'

'Colin—'

'And I know that she likes me. Tonight, she said such extraordinary things to me. And I felt so happy – but

she said "like". She was very definite about it. And liking isn't enough.'

'Colin, listen to me. I know Lindsay very well, and she's rather more careful with words than she appears to be. If that's what she said, there will have been a reason. She's impetuous *and* hesitant, you know. Give it *time*, Colin. Trust your instincts. I would . . .' He broke off. 'What am I doing? I appear to be encouraging you. Why I should be doing that, in these circumstances, God alone knows . . .'

'It's because we're friends,' Colin said. 'You like me even as a rival, and I like you even as a rival. You know that.'

'I admire your ability to get your own way.' Rowland gave him a considering look. 'In fact, I sometimes think you're the most ruthless man I've ever known. As to liking . . .' He repressed a smile. 'Go away, Colin, and don't push your luck.'

Colin advanced as far as the door. He stopped and turned back.

'Advice,' he said. 'Rowland, I need *advice*. I mustn't mess this up. I have to get this *right* . . .'

'Dear God, you are *unbelievable*.' Rowland gave a groan. 'You want *my* advice? *Now*?' He paused. 'Very well, Colin, I'll give you my advice – and much good it may do you. Bear in mind my own record. Bear in mind the fact that I obviously don't understand women and never have . . .'

'I'm sure that's not true, Rowland.'

'Just don't waste any time, Colin, trying to work out their motivation, that's all. Don't assume that they are ever rational – they're not. Remember, they change their minds every five seconds. Remember, their requirements from a man tend to vary, so one moment they want a tyrant, and the next a Galahad. Remember they're quite keen on priests, father-substitutes, son-

substitutes for all I know. Remember their penchant for princes, and heroes . . .'

'Hell. Rowland, are you sure about this? That rules me out then . . .'

'And remember that quite a lot of the time, Colin,' Rowland cast a suspicious eye upon him, 'quite a lot of the time, I think they'd just settle for a man who was very very good in bed . . .'

'No, no, no,' Colin said, in a somewhat evasive way. 'I'm sure you're wrong there, Rowland.' He paused delicately. 'Of course, I admit it would probably help . . .'

'Who knows?' Rowland pushed him towards the door again. 'I most certainly don't. Nor do I care any more. As of now, I'm giving up the quest. I shall remain celibate. Solitude has always suited me. I shall live like a monk . . .'

'I *slightly* doubt that, Rowland . . .'

 Colin had said. He had looked carefully at his friend. Rowland had other ways besides arrogance of disguising pain, he thought. And so, knowing how much it cost Rowland to turn the conversation in this way, and knowing why he did so, he had left.

Walking beside Lindsay now, with the Plaza in sight Colin's heart lifted. He had known Rowland wished them to part without animosity or resentment; he had never seen better evidence of his acting ability, or his generosity, than he had then – and if that generosity came about only as a result of a rejection, well, he could forgive Rowland that. The question was, when Rowland spoke of Lindsay, had he been right?

He came to a halt at the corner of the Park and turned Lindsay to face him. He watched the moonlight work its magic upon her face. It made her skin silver; it gave brilliancy and depth to her eyes; tiny crystals of snow clung to her hair and to her lashes. Looking at her, Colin felt a wash of desire and helpless love. Bending down.

to her, he kissed her lips, which felt warm, and which opened in a sweet, familiar way under his.

A thousand questions and hopes thronged in his mind, yet the instant he touched her they became immaterial. Who could define or explain love, he felt, looking down at her. If he had to say why he loved her, he could give a million answers, none sufficient and none exact.

He loved her because she made a day bright; because she made him laugh, and think; because she was truthful. He loved her because she was often muddled and confused, as he was; he loved her because, when he kissed her, her mouth was the way it was.

Lindsay, looking up at him, wished he would kiss her again, because when he kissed or touched her, she remembered who she was. As they had walked quietly together through the snow, it had come to her that she had taken one decision correctly tonight, and that a second was easily made. Navigating here was less difficult than she imagined; there were reefs, it was true, but there might be a way of avoiding them – a way that had stolen into her mind in this quiet moonlit city as they walked.

‘Can you wish on a full moon, or only on a new one, do you think, Colin?’ she said, unfastening her coat and his, then moving inside it, so the warmth of her body as pressed against his.

‘I’m sure you can,’ he replied. ‘I’m sure you can wish on the moon at any point in its cycle. It’s a planet.’

Lindsay wished. She wished a momentous thing, being practical, as well as superstitious, the intention of relying solely on supernatural rested her head against his chest and – the door – found herself at peace.

‘I want you to know something,’ she said. ‘I saw me in that doorway with Rowland tonight. I want to ask him about that?’

'No. Not directly.' He hesitated. 'I would ask you, but I'm afraid to, I think.'

'You have no reason to be afraid. I give you my word, Colin.'

'Then I have no questions; they're all answered.'

'I was saying goodbye to Rowland, and he to me. We were both leaving behind something that didn't happen. I can't explain it any other way. Can you understand that?'

'Of course.'

'It was a final goodbye, Colin. Truly.' Her eyes rested on his, then a glint of amusement came into them. 'And it was a very *quiet* goodbye too, you should know. Marked by English understatement and English restraint.'

Colin's face lit. 'I'm very glad about the restraint,' he said, in a dry way. 'If it had been unrestrained, I should have found it very hard to bear.' He paused. 'Just don't try saying goodbye to me, because I won't let you. Are you clear about that?'

'You sound very determined.'

'I am very determined. I've learned a lot tonight. Never waste time – you might have very little left. Besides . . .' He took her hand and they began walking on again. 'Don't forget all those ancestors of mine. English and American. I have centuries of ruthless self-interest in my veins, Lindsay. Never forget that.'

'Ah, yes, those ancestors,' Lindsay said, as they went about to cross Central Park South. 'I'd forgotten about them and all those riches of yours. Ah well, I forgive you for them. I can love you despite them, I expect . . .'

Colin stopped dead in the middle of the road. He went white.

'What did you just say? What did you just say?'

'I used a four-letter word,' Lindsay replied. 'I'm sorry about that . . .'

'Say it again!' Colin made a grab at her. 'Say it again, loudly, at once, without equivocation . . .'

'I shall whisper it,' Lindsay said, pulling him towards the hotel entrance. 'First we have to go upstairs, then I have to call my son, then I have to wash and undress . . .'

Colin groaned.

'Then maybe I'll admit it. I'll slip it into the conversation . . . when we're in bed.'

They were in their room, and in their bed, with great speed. The call to Oxford was made, but it was brief. There was no conversation – or need for it. Lindsay's confession, which Colin extracted with some ruthlessness, was made, she later claimed, *in extremis* – this being a phrase, she added, that she knew Colin would not need her to translate.

As Colin and Lindsay, that morning, finally slept, Jippy got up. He tiptoed out of the bedroom, where Markov lay dreaming, and crept into the living-room beyond. He had spent a night without sleep, watching the flux of future events. This process, Jippy felt, was akin to the processing of photographs. When he helped Markov develop his films, and in particular when he worked with the delicate techniques needed for silver prints, it delighted him that an image could be stored, invisible to the human eye, on paper. He loved to watch the pictures-to-be as they lay in the baths of developing fluid. He loved watching them slowly emerge, as mere shapes and outlines at first, then, gradually, as shapes that had content and could be read.

Sometimes, if errors had been made, this process remained incomplete – and sometimes Jippy would deliberately lift the picture from the developing fluid too soon, because he liked suggestions and hints better than exactitude. To glimpse the future, he felt, was like this. He was rarely, virtually never, shown a clear image

– although, in the Plaza the previous night, he had been shown just that.

For this Jippy was grateful. To see the future, even a suggestion of the future, was terrifying. It filled Jippy with misery and fear and bewilderment. Few could live their lives with any tranquillity, he believed, if they could see what lay ahead.

Today, seeing the possible future and hating it, he had decided on a spell. Jippy had only intermittent faith in his spells, most of which had been taught him as a child by his Armenian grandmother. He suspected she had muddled the spells in the first place, and that his own memory of them was imperfect at best. Nevertheless, he intended to try. For Pascal Lamartine, he could do nothing; for Lindsay, whom he knew well, intervention might be possible, and since he loved Lindsay, and could see the urgency of intervention, he had decided to do the spell now, at dawn – a powerful moment, his grandmother always said.

He decided to do it on the kitchen table, which was next to a window facing east. On the empty surface of this wooden table, he assembled the objects he needed. He laid down a hair, which he had removed from Lindsay's coat when he kissed her goodbye the previous night. Next to the hair, and for want of anything else he placed a postcard Lindsay had sent him some time before, when she and Markov were away in Thailand on a fashion shoot. The postcard showed a glittery pagoda, and the message was brief: 'Today Markov and I came here and were given a lotus flower. It is like an artichoke, only prettier. Markov is missing you badly. I send love'.

This, if characteristic, was less than ideal, but it would have to suffice. He rummaged around in the food cupboards, and eventually settled for a packet of muesli – again, less than ideal, but it contained nuts and grains and they had some powers, of course. Jippy sprinkled

he muesli in a lopsided circle, centred the hair and the postcard inside it, and then, after further consideration, placed next to them an orange and an egg. The egg kept rolling around, so eventually he put it in an eggcup and surveyed his handiwork. It was not impressive, and its lack of symmetry offended him. He decided to add a second egg, also in an eggcup, and resisted the impulse to arrange these objects in the vague shape of a face.

He glanced towards the window; the sky was lightening and he knew he had to be quick. The orange kept rolling around in an unstable way, and this made his hands start to shake. 'Stay s-s-still,' he whispered, as the orange threatened to roll out of the circle. The orange obeyed and Jippy felt a little happier at this.

From the pocket of his neat striped pyjamas, he took out the small bent coin his grandmother had once given him – a rare coin, this – and placed it in the circle, between the orange and the eggs.

Then he knelt down, rested his forehead against the edge of the table and waited. He muttered under his breath. He watched thin sharp winter sun strike the edge of the window-frame and the edge of the sink. As it slowly began to reach the table, and his circle of objects grew bright, Jippy began on his special prayer of benevolence, to those forces his grandmother had taught him dispensed benevolence – although only when they were propitiated, or in the right mood, she said.

Jippy prayed this prayer with absolute concentration. He gave it every ounce of his energy. When he was on line, the sweat began to run down his body, and his feet and hands began to twitch like a dog dreaming. Halfway through the spell, finding he was afraid, he left out one vital phrase and had to go back. He asked the spirits – politely, his grandmother had always emphasized the importance of this – to avoid the certain evil he had glimpsed the previous night; to make the unlikely, likely;

to bend, twist, distort and reassemble events, and having done so, to reorganize them so they were sweet to the eye and the heart. Jippy knew this was well within the powers of these spirits; they did that sort of thing a hundred times a day, on a whim, on a flick of the wrist.

In a humble way – humility was also a wise tactic, his grandmother said – Jippy asked these spirits to employ their artistry. He said this several times, emphasizing the point, because the spirits, on occasion, could be tired or bored, and could simply botch the job, then walk away from it. Jippy did not want botching here – he feared it. He wanted perfect joinery; he wanted a seamless finish. The capricious spirits appeared to listen to this.

To listen, however, was not enough. Jippy redoubled his efforts. He lapsed; he went down, down, down into some strange liquid, swirling space, where he swam back and forth, back and forth. In this space, his spell came to an end. All the words were used up. There, Jippy found he was very afraid; it was so hot it was cold; he started shivering and panting – and it was in this state that Markov found him some time later.

He stared at him in panic; Jippy was lying on the kitchen floor, twitching. An epileptic fit, Markov thought. Jippy's eyes were tight shut and there was foam on his lips. Giving a cry, Markov fell to his knees and put his arms around him. He lifted him up, then found Jippy was too heavy to move. He almost fell over; he started crying Jippy's name and kissing his face. He tried to remember what you did if someone had a fit – but was this a fit? 'Darling, darling, darling,' he said, clasping Jippy's hands. He tried to find a pulse and could not find one. Jippy seemed not to be breathing. Frantic now, he laid him back down on the floor, and in the wrong way, at the wrong angle, placed his mouth on Jippy's mouth. He breathed air into him. He started counting, realized he did not know why he was counting, and breathed again. He had begun to cry, and his tears

ran down onto Jippy's white face. 'Please, please, please, please,' he said. He breathed a third breath and Jippy's eyes opened.

'W-what are you d-doing?' he said, and sprang to his feet. He made a grab at the table, which Markov was about to knock over, and Markov, feeling foolish, slowly rose to his feet. He looked at the table, at a ring of muesli, a postcard, a human hair, a coin, two eggs and an orange. Jippy was looking at this orange in consternation. The eggs were fine; the hair and the postcard and the coin were fine; the orange, probably thanks to Markov's ministrations, and kickings out, was inside the circle still – but only just.

'I thought you were dead,' Markov said. 'I was giving you mouth to mouth.'

'W-well, you n-nearly ruined the whole t-thing,' Jippy said, somewhat crossly. 'It's very d-delicate.'

Markov was hurt. 'Jippy,' he said, 'these goddamn spells of yours do not work. They have never worked and they are never *going* to work. Those spells are a load of *baloney*.'

Jippy, who did not agree with him in this case, gave him a calm look.

'Th-this is for Lindsay,' he said, 'and it is going to work.'

'For Lindsay?' Markov looked at the assemblage with more interest. 'Explain,' he said.

Jippy explained. Markov paled, then nodded, then frowned, then, smiling, raised his eyebrows.

'Well, well, *well*!' he said, 'Stranger than fiction! Who'd have believed it?'

Markov himself did not believe it, but he did not want to hurt Jippy, so he kissed him. 'Now come and look at the news on TV,' he added. 'You were certainly right about the Conrad, darling. Updates every half-hour, and paparazzi positively crawling all over the place . . .'

* * *

of course. It started *gripping* my chest. I thought: is the end. I am having a heart attack, right here, in this damned hall . . .'

'Yes, yes,' said Juliet, 'very understandable, at the age. Emily, I must go—'

'*Fortunately*,' Emily continued, in an unstoppable flow, 'a dear friend of my nephew's was there. Such a good young man! Experienced at first aid, on top of all his other qualities . . . He climbs, you know, so he could be, I guess. He took charge immediately! I do so respect when men do that, don't you, Juliet? Only it turned out, it wasn't a heart attack after all. Indigestion, I think. The soup we had had was delicious, but rather heavy. Anyway, by the time I recovered, it was all over bar and routing . . .'

Juliet, who had been about to turn away, had a sudden suspicion that there was a subtext to this interminable stream of uninteresting and irrelevant information. She stopped and gave Emily a long cool azure look.

'As a matter of fact,' she said, with emphasis, 'I don't like it when men take charge. I've always found that particular male tendency irritating, to say the least. It applies whether they're administering first aid, or locking people in their apartments . . .'

'I wouldn't have *thought*,' Emily said, 'that now would be the best time to call upon poor Miss Lawrence. She must have had very little sleep . . .'

Juliet did not like the way this remark was made.

'And I wouldn't have thought that was any of your damn business, Emily,' she replied, and walked away smartly.

Emily smiled as the doors closed. On the warpath, she thought, wondering how Juliet managed to look so cool so early in the morning, an art she herself had never acquired. She liked a woman who gave as good as she got, she thought – and her opinion of Juliet McKenna rose accordingly.

'You can't see her,' Angelica said to Juliet, in a sullen way, opening the door to Natasha's apartment. 'She's sedated. She's not seeing anybody.'

'Then I shall wait until she is ready to see me.'

Juliet, who disliked Angelica intensely, and who knew her dislike was returned, gave her a dismissive glance and walked past her. She went through into the white living-room, and sat down.

'Angelica, I know perfectly well that Natasha *won't* be sedated. It's difficult to persuade her to take aspirin. So don't waste my time, please.'

'She's upset. Distraught.' Angelica glowered at her. 'Most people wouldn't need to be told that.'

'That's precisely why I'm here. She will need me.'

'What she *needs* is sleep, rest, and peace and quiet.'

Juliet gave her a cold glance; she was not a woman who wasted time arguing with those she disliked, and her upbringing had taught her that under no circumstances did one argue with servants.

'I do *not* understand . . .' she said, frowning around the room, 'how any of this could have happened. It's appalling. Is Jonathan all right?'

'He's better now.' Angelica's face softened. 'He was frightened out of his wits. But the doctor came. He quietened down eventually . . .'

'Where's his father?'

'I wouldn't know,' Angelica replied, her tone suggesting she did not greatly care either. Her face became set. 'He had to talk to the police - him and that Englishman who was with him when she fell. He took off for TriBeCa. Knowing him, he'll be working.'

'At a time like this?'

'At any time. He's like that.'

Juliet considered ~~this information~~ and her dislike for Tomas Court deepened.

'If I'd been here', Angelica said suddenly, her face

reddening, 'it would never have happened. She wouldn't have got past *me*. I'd have cut her throat for her. Strangled her with my bare hands. That's what I'd have done.'

Juliet looked at her heavy bulk, at her small black eyes, and the hate in her face; she could well believe this flat and definite statement.

'I don't understand . . .' she said, 'how she managed any of it. Where were the bodyguards? What in hell was that stupid Texan doing?'

'Natasha gave him the night off.' Angelica's expression became evasive. 'She didn't want anyone here, not him, not me. I said I'd stay, but no, she wasn't having it . . . She didn't want people around – you know, when *he's* here. She doesn't like people to see – it upsets her, the way he talks to her.'

Juliet digested this interesting information also. She might have liked to question Angelica further on that subject; unfortunately her upbringing had taught her not to listen to servants' gossip, either. She considered the hulking, handsome Texan bodyguard, whose blond, muscled good looks and constant presence had always annoyed her.

'So where's that ridiculous Texan now?' she said. 'I blame him for this. It was a rank dereliction of his duties. No matter what Natasha said, he should have *insisted*. What's he doing now? Running around shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted?'

Angelica shot her a small black glance. She smiled. 'Maybe he's busy shutting doors,' she said, an odd gloating note entering her voice. 'I wouldn't know. He's around here somewhere. I saw him talking to the police . . .' She paused. 'Mind you, that was hours ago . . .'

'Well, I hope Natasha dispenses with his services. She won't need them now in any case . . .'

'You think so?' Angelica smiled again. 'You could be right. Natasha might want him to stay around though.'

She's been very satisfied with him – the way he performs his duties. Always vigilant. Never lets up . . .' She paused, her small black eyes resting on Juliet's face with detectable malice. 'You really want me to tell Natasha you're here? You want me to do it right now?'

'Yes, I do.' Juliet gave her a cold look. 'And when you've done that, you can bring me some strong black coffee, please. And while you're about it, an ashtray.'

The eyes of the two women intersected. Angelica left the room. She was frightened of Juliet McKechnie – but she had additional reasons now for obeying her. She made a brief call on the internal line from the kitchen, replacing the receiver after the telephone in Natasha's room upstairs had rung only twice. She began to prepare coffee; she watched the percolator begin to bubble. Then, despite explicit instructions to the contrary from Natasha, instructions given her only a few hours previously, she opened the jib-door as she had been longing to do, and in a state of mounting excitement, began to climb the staircase.

She padded silently along the upper corridor, pausing by the sheet closets. The door to Natasha's bedroom was closed; she listened to silence. She then padded quietly to the end of the corridor, and Jonathan's room. He had received a mild sedative, even if his mother had not; he was now sleeping peacefully. Angelica looked down at him with pride and love; she tucked the duvet more securely around him, kissed his flushed cheek, and touched the dressing that had been applied to the knife-cut.

Love and fear for him rose up in her heart with such force that she felt almost dizzy. She straightened up, pressing her hand against her chest, as her heart began to hammer painfully. Angelica had never carried a child, but this boy, whom she had nursed from birth, she loved with a mother's intensity. Tears came to her black eyes. Making a small crooning sound, she tucked his favourite

bear more securely in his arms and padded from the room. Bitch, bitch, bitch, she muttered to herself. *Dead* bitch, she corrected herself, thinking of the sheeted shape she had seen on her return to the Conrad. Well, my curses surely worked, she said to herself, and feeling a dark exultation, her breath coming faster now, she padded through into the small sitting-room.

This room, as she had expected, had been used. She looked at the crumpled cushions on the couch; she looked at the two glasses on the nearby table. Natasha drank wine; the Texan bodyguard favoured tequila. She picked up the glasses in turn and sniffed them. One smelled of red wine; the other – and she tasted it to make sure – contained a few droplets of water.

She stared at this glass, the blood rising up and darkening her face. She looked at the other clues here: a pair of Natasha's pretty shoes lay kicked aside near the couch; on the carpet next to them, she saw, was a string of pearls. Stooping to pick them up – they were valuable – she saw their clasp was broken and the pearls were unravelling. A cascade of seed pearls fell from the end of the silk stringing. She weighed the fatter pearls in her palm; she rubbed them back and forth between her fingers. Making a small grunting sound, she bent and groped for the lost pearls and found them secreted in a fold in the couch's upholstery. Her breathing had become shallow and rapid; the clasp to these pearls had not been broken when she helped fasten them around Natasha's neck the previous evening.

Dropping the pearls, she pressed her hands over her mouth. She felt dizzy again, and she had never felt heavier, bulkier, slower. Her heart was now pounding and her head was swimming with blood. 'No, no, no,' she said, under her breath, rocking back and forth. She looked at the scattered pearls, and then turned, clumsily, knocking over one of the glasses. She stumbled across the room, then, slowing, crept along the corridor. She

stopped at Natasha's door, her heart thumping, and pressed her ear against its panels.

She found she could not hear properly. Her heart was banging too loudly, and there was another noise, a sighing and a susurrations, a tidal sound, like waves beating in upon a beach. She shook her head, as if to clear her ears of water, and the sound increased in volume. It began to beat in on her with a mounting rhythmic insistence. She pressed her hands against her hot face, and then over her mouth, to stop herself crying out. She knew what she was hearing now: she was hearing a mystery, a rite to which she had herself never been admitted. Of its details, she was ignorant, since she had never had a lover, male or female. Even so, she knew what was happening on the other side of that door. She knew who these lovers were, and she could see and hear what they did with the hot clarity of a vision: the moistness of it; the touchings and whisperings; the mounting urgency; the seeking mouths; the desperation. She began to tremble violently; a low sound of rage escaped her lips as she heard the groan and the cry that marked the crucial moment of union.

She backed away from the door and pressed herself back against the wall, covering her ears with her hands. She turned her face to the wall; through the wall she could sense violence, secrets and pleasure; she trembled at the force of this *thing*, this force, which excited, shamed and angered her, and which she thought of as a violation. It went on and on, for a longer time than she would have believed possible. It was like listening to a killing; then, with some guttural extreme sound from the man, and some strange drowning yet victorious cry from the woman, it was over.

Angelica waited. Gentler sounds came from beyond the door now. She wiped away her tears. She wiped the envy, outrage and anger from her face; she waited until her breathing quieted and the hot flush of excited

shame subsided, then she crossed to the door and rapped on its panels. She gave the message she had been told to give, and after a delay – an insolent, careless delay – the door opened a fraction.

Angelica was given a tiny glimpse of the devastation wrought to the room the previous night, a devastation that Natasha and her partner were blind to, she presumed – unless, she realized, it suited them. The Natasha Lawrence interposed her body. She stood there wrapped in a loose, thin, white robe, the door open only a crack, looking at Angelica. As Angelica well knew Natasha Lawrence, though gentle, could be cruel – and this capacity in her had always intensified Angelica's devotion. There was cruelty now in the way she flaunted her state, Angelica found. The expression in her eyes dreamy, sated, yet faintly amused, cut Angelica to the heart. She knew at once that, while her position in this household was safe, that look was a form of dismissal.

Natasha made no attempt to disguise the fact that this was an unwelcome interruption. Her black hair, loose on her shoulders, was damp with sweat. There were vivid marks on her pale throat; she was breathing rapidly, her lips parted as if in expectation of more kisses. Colour stained her cheeks, and her eyes, liquid, brilliant, seemed to rest on Angelica, yet look beyond her to further pleasures. The thin robe, carelessly clasped at the waist, was neither properly wrapped around her, nor fastened. Angelica could see the roundness of her breasts and the hard points of her nipples; she could see her slender bare feet and glimpse her pale slender thighs. Her thighs were wet, Angelica saw, and the thin material of the robe adhered to this seeping, spreading dampness.

She was being shown sex, Angelica realized. With pain, she also realized that Natasha enjoyed showing her this, and that the demonstration was both deliberate and careless. It seemed to her that Natasha wished to

exhult, yet was ultimately indifferent to her reaction. She wondered if this exhibition was intended to evoke desire – as it certainly did – or whether it could be a warning, an instruction to observe her place from now on, and accept her exclusion from these precincts. Whatever the reason for this manifestation, Natasha's beauty, at that moment, burned her. To Angelica she looked like a goddess.

'Tomas will come down,' she said, giving a small sigh. 'Angelica, tell Juliet that Tomas will be down directly.'

This information proved inexact; Tomas Court did come downstairs – but he did so one hour later.

'Would you mind not smoking?' he said in a polite way to Juliet, moving across the white room and opening the window. 'Angelica brought you coffee? Good. Now – how can I help you?'

Juliet slowly turned her azure eyes upon him. Angelica had said nothing of his presence in the apartment – her motive no doubt malice. Tomas Court's arrival came as a complete surprise to her. Having met him in person only once before, at the Foxe party the previous evening, Juliet now saw the necessity for examining him a great deal more closely. She measured his height and build; she noted that he had calculated and she was sure of the calculation – that his appearance would impart its own message. His demeanour was that of the husband, at ease in a familiar home; it was also – and markedly so – that of the lover.

He was dressed in the manner of a man who has thrown on his clothes in haste. He was unshaven, and as he moved past her, she realized he was also unwashed. A faint but unmistakable scent reached her nostrils; she understood that he had been careful not to come downstairs with the smell of sex still on his body.

She felt jealousy and pain at once. Seeing he was watching her face for just such a reaction, she gave him none.

'You can't help me,' she replied coldly. 'I want to see Natasha. Does she know I'm here?'

'Yes, I'm afraid she does.'

'Well, *I'm* afraid I'll just have to wait until she's ready to see me.'

'As you wish,' he replied quietly.

Juliet's mouth tightened. That brief exchange told her a great deal – not least that Tomas Court now knew of her relationship with Natasha. It had not taken him long to extract that confession, she thought; then she realized that, in a polite way, he had also rebuked her.

'I came when I saw the news on TV,' she said at once. 'I wanted to say – I am very sorry for you both. It was a terrible thing . . .'

'Terrible things happen.'

'Is your son recovering?'

'I hope so. He is sleeping now. The doctor will be calling in again later. He wasn't physically harmed, apart from a small cut. But the shock – you can imagine . . .'

He paused, then, as if coming to a decision, sat down opposite her on the white couch; Juliet wondered if he knew it was a couch she had chosen.

'I think it will be very good for Jonathan to get away from this place,' he continued, in a deliberate way. 'I'm sure it will help him to spend the next three months in England. Natasha too, obviously . . .'

Not a man who wasted time, Juliet thought – and that remark had been a throwing down of the gauntlet.

'I'm sure,' she replied, in a cool way. 'You've decided not to postpone then?'

'I shan't alter my plans.'

'Really? I'd have thought Natasha might need time to recover.'

'Natasha is resilient. Very.'

Juliet flushed. She could hear the warning in that quiet remark; it was meant to suggest a more intimate knowledge of Natasha than her own, and that angered her.

Meeting his gaze squarely, she said, 'Are you flaunting something? It isn't necessary. I always knew the Natasha would be away with you for three months while you made this movie. I'm prepared for that.'

'Are you?'

His expression, to her surprise, became one of sympathy. He rose and began to move about the room. He reached out and straightened a picture. His manner, Juliet noted, remained calm and considering.

'It's a very good part for Natasha,' he remarked, after some minutes of silence. 'Tell me, did she show you the script?'

'No,' Juliet replied, knowing he would see this as an admission of weakness. 'I have read the novel, however, and I wouldn't share your view about Natasha's part. I disliked this Helen Huntingdon she's going to play - pious, possessive, masochistic woman.'

'I agree, particularly as the novel progresses. There's an irresolution on the author's part, I feel. She gives glimpses of a far more interesting woman. She places the conventions of her time, while also challenging them.' He gave her a somewhat bored glance. 'In any case, the novel is an irrelevance really. I do not make adaptations. I dislike the Brontë output on the whole, with the exception of one novel - not this one. It happens - and I have never subscribed to all that hysterical Brontë worship. Emily excepted, the Brontës wrote women's novels.'

'I certainly hope so,' said Juliet.

'My script bears little relation to the novel in any case. I've made drastic changes. I've altered the characters completely ...'

'Have you also altered the husband's part?' Juliet asked, in, coldly. 'I'm sure you'll have made that a great deal more sympathetic.'

'I've ensured it's played by a great actor.' He gave a shrug. 'That will make a difference of course ...'

the character is certainly changed. As to sympathy – I'm not interested in evoking sympathy. That is always easy to do – quickly and cheaply.'

'How very arrogant you are.' Juliet rose. 'I knew you would be, of course. I detest men like you. Why didn't you bother to wash before you came downstairs? I don't smell victory, if that's what you're hoping. Conquest, possibly. I'd rather wait here alone, if you don't mind.'

'That is your prerogative.'

He turned his pale steady gaze upon her. Again Juliet had the disconcerting feeling that the only emotions he felt for her were curiosity and sympathy. His refusal to betray the least indication of anger, uncertainty or jealousy enraged her, she found.

'May I say something, though, before I go? You may feel that you know my wife—'

'I know that I know her, and she is not your wife; you should remember that she's your ex-wife.'

'I never think of her in that way. If you asked Natasha, I suspect she would tell you that she never thinks of me as her ex-husband, either. Never mind that. Were you ever married?'

'Yes, once.'

'Then you will know, every marriage is a secret shared by two people. It's unwise for any outsider to assume they know that secret. I'd prefer you to be spared the ordeal of a long humiliating wait, so I'd suggest, for your own sake, that you leave here now.'

'I'll wait until Natasha asks me to leave. This is her apartment, not yours.'

'As you wish.' He gave a sigh. 'She won't come down, you know.'

'I don't believe that. She wouldn't do that—'

'I think you'll find that she will.'

He spoke quietly and with total certainty. So authoritative was his tone that Juliet, for the first time, felt doubt. Instantly, she was less composed; her voice rose

as she replied, and she regretted this, but could not prevent it.

'If Natasha does not come down,' she said, 'it will be because you are here. You're obsessed with controlling her. You aren't satisfied with controlling her work, you have to control her life as well. She's frightened of you. You bully her.'

'Is that what you think?' He looked surprised. 'I thought you were more intelligent. Don't you find that scenario a little glib? Simplistic? Is Natasha really such a poor thing? I don't believe so.' He paused. 'I begin to see – you don't really know her at all, do you? Have you ever seen Natasha when she's working?'

'I've seen her on stage, yes. Many times.'

'That wasn't really what I meant; then you're watching a finished performance. If you had watched Natasha put that performance together, piece by piece . . .' He gave her a steady look. 'Working with my wife is a very interesting process. Her approach is the very opposite of my own. She is oblique, timid, instinctual, and emotional; I am none of those things. She swerves in on her target, whereas I track it in a controlled, planned way. Yet she hits that target, time after time after time . . .' He paused. 'So I have come to see, Natasha's attack is every bit as carefully planned as my own – but being a woman, she prefers to disguise that. On set, obviously, I give Natasha direction. I can assure you, on set and off, she submits to direction only if she wants to do so. And sometimes she contrives it so that the direction I give her is the direction she has been secretly desiring.'

There was a silence. Juliet met that pale gaze. She did not like the information he was giving her, and she did not like that word 'submit', either. She suspected he had intended it to cause a specific unease – and if so, he had succeeded.

As she stood looking at him, weighing the implications of his words, she became aware, for the first time, of the

background noises in the room, the clickings, creakings and shiftings which, in her experience, were always to be sensed at the Conrad. A radiator made a faint sound; a voice filtered into the room from the stairs. It was born in on her, with sudden force, that a woman had been killed in this building the previous night.

She found herself looking at Tomas Court's hands; her throat had become dry; he had strong square hands, of some beauty. Suddenly, information rushed at her. She had been telling herself that Court's presence here could be explained, that if he had been admitted to Natasha's room now, it was because, after the night's events, she was afraid and desperate for consolation or protection. Now she saw that supposition was wrong; she knew it with every instinct in her body. Court's sexual reunion with his wife had another explanation – and it was one she had no wish to examine.

'It's a little hot in here, don't you find?' he said.

'A little, yes,' Juliet replied, moving further away from him.

'I'll ask Angelica to turn down the thermostat.'

He removed his jacket as he said this, and rolled back his shirtsleeves. Juliet saw – and knew he intended her to see – that he had a scratch on his inner arm. He had read her mind, Juliet thought, and he was now answering an unspoken question. She looked at the scratch, which ran from elbow to wrist. Since she had a similar scratch on her own back, she knew precisely who had made it and in exactly what circumstances.

'You've injured yourself,' she said.

'The injury was not self-inflicted.'

'Your marriage is *over*,' she said, paling with anger. It was over before you divorced. It's *finished*.'

'You would want to believe that, of course.' He paused; for the first and only time she saw his equilibrium threatened. 'I wouldn't deny there's been pain

in my marriage. Considerable pain is involved – and that pain is mutual.’

‘I’m not discussing pain – of any sort – with you,’ Juliet said sharply. She moved further away. ‘I’m aware of your interest in the subject. It’s apparent – only too apparent – in every one of your damned movies.’

‘True, true.’ He gave her a pale glance. ‘But I do at least avoid the banalities of pain, you know. Give me credit for that. You won’t find whips or masks in any of my movies. That kind of tawdry game doesn’t interest me remotely . . .’ He paused. ‘Nor, in case you’re wondering, does it interest Natasha.’

He bent and picked up his jacket. Juliet, uneasy and distressed, looked at him with loathing. He was intensely male, she found; the fact that even she was aware of his sexuality made her violently angry. She was beginning to see that Natasha might desire and fear this man – or desire him *because* she feared him. That idea sickened her; of that need, Natasha could be cured, she told herself. Giving Court a glance of defiance, she returned to her chair and sat down again. This, she was glad to see, annoyed him.

‘Shall I tell you why you’re wasting your time here?’ he said, ‘and why my wife will not come down to see you, however long you wait?’

‘Natasha will come down. She loves me.’

‘Perhaps, to an extent. There is one requirement, however – and in your case, it’s missing.’

Juliet gave him a look of disbelief and scorn.

‘Oh, please,’ she said, ‘don’t tell me you’re *that* stupid. Believe me, that particular lack is an advantage, as Natasha has often told me.’

‘Has she? Well, my wife will always try to be gentle, but I’m afraid you misunderstand.’ He paused. ‘There is one difference between you and me, and it has nothing to do with gender. You cannot hurt Natasha, you see, whereas I can. And my wife retains the ability to hurt

. She is the only woman who has ever had that ability and don't smile, no man has it either.'

'I wasn't smiling. I don't view the ability to cause pain as a distinction.'

'Then we differ.' He gave her a quiet glance. 'Allow, if you'll forgive me, I have to work. I'm going down to my loft in TriBeCa. You're sure you won't let me see you out, drop you off somewhere?'

'No. And I find it astonishing you can even consider working at such a time—'

'Oh, I can always work.' His pale eyes rested steadily on her face. 'No matter the circumstances. The work, ultimately, is the only thing of any importance.'

'Another male boast.' Juliet returned his look coldly. 'If your son had died last night, would you be working this morning?'

'No.' His gaze moved away from hers and came to rest on the blank wall opposite. 'But next week I should have worked, or the week after.'

His tone reproached Juliet, who at once regretted her remark.

'That wouldn't be true of Natasha,' she said slowly, considering him. 'If anything happened to Jonathan, it would destroy her.'

'I think so too. I expect that is the one difference between us.' He paused. 'Now I must go. I'm glad I've met you.'

With that – and Juliet sensed he meant his final remark – he left. Still angry and discomposed, she remained in the room. She sat there for four hours, trying to understand the information she had been given, and the information she was certain he had withheld.

Several times she rose to her feet, intent on going downstairs and confronting Natasha. Each time, realizing that such a confrontation at such a moment was unthinkable, she sat down again. As Tomas Court had

predicted, she began to feel a pained humiliation. When she could endure that no longer, she left.

She called many times over the following weekend to find all calls fielded by a machine or a surly Angelica. Not one of her calls was returned and, subsequently, not one of her letters was answered.

She suffered, but less than she would have done when younger, she told herself. Refusing to speculate any further on the nature of the bond that held Court and Natasha together, it came to be her view that Natasha had accepted her husband's aegis — an error fatal in its consequences, she believed, and one made by too many women. She wrote no more letters, and in this way, with many questions left unresolved, she came to accept that the Conrad chapters of her life, as she now thought of them, were over.

Being a resilient woman, she determined not to look back, but to close the book on the entire episode of her experience, such ends were always best viewed in retrospect, beginning.

ADVENT

afraid of this temple, this lake, these oaks and this greensward. She was afraid of any property large enough to boast a park, and she was terrified of the house at the heart of it. The reason for this fear was simple: she feared temple, lake, greensward, oaks, park, house, because they belonged to Colin.

For the past two days, she had been trying to persuade Colin to describe his house – forewarned is forearmed, she had told herself. She had tried on the long overnight flight from New York, which they had taken that Friday; she had tried in her London apartment, to which they had returned from the airport in Colin's extraordinary car, the most powerful she had ever driven in. She had tried on the motorway down here, and when they finally arrived – not at some country inn, that plan had changed, but at Shute Farm – she had tried again.

Not at first. She had been so entranced by the farmhouse, which proved even lovelier than it had seemed in photographs, that for some time she had forgotten Shute Court altogether. Colin had somehow ensured that the farmhouse had been made ready for them; they could spend this night there, he had suggested. Some fairy had been in, Lindsay felt, forgetting the magic wand of money. This benevolent personage had lit the cooking stove, lit the fires, polished and cleaned, made up the brass bed with lavender-scented sheets, and left food and wine for them. Even the lights had been left on, so, as Colin's great car purred and bumped its way up a rutted track, and she saw the house for the first time through the gathering dusk of a winter's afternoon, its lighted windows seemed to welcome them.

With excitement and delight, Lindsay had rushed from room to room, while Colin pointed out to her its various architectural features. Lindsay loved its wide-boarded, uneven oak floors, which reminded her of the deck of a ship. She loved its beams and low doorways,

which meant Colin had constantly to duck his head. She loved its old and twisting stairs, the soft honey stone of its lintels, and the kitchen, with its scrubbed floor, warm range, rag rugs, dresser and array of blue and white china dishes.

Such was her delight that it was some while before she noticed that Colin was becoming quieter and quieter. The more she exclaimed and praised, the unhappier he became – and Lindsay, realizing the reason for this blushed guiltily at her own stupidity and was silenced. Colin, after all, did not want her to live here. He wanted her to live in Shute Court, and – although that issue remained unresolved between them, Lindsay not answering his proposal and Colin not pressing her – she could understand that he now felt it was a mistake to have brought her here. He had not foreseen, perhaps, the extent to which this place, small and humble no doubt by his standards, would please her.

Later that evening, still feeling an unaccountable residual anxiety for Tom, she telephoned him at his Oxford lodgings. But Tom, deep in an essay on Nietzsche, claimed he was too busy to talk, and too busy to see her for the next few days. Lindsay, who had been longing to see him, resigned herself to this; over dinner, she began on her questions about Shute again. Colin could not be persuaded to describe his house, however; he admitted it was large – well, quite large; beyond that, not one word could she prise from him.

As the hour grew later, and outside, owls called to each other, she began to suspect that Colin had further plans for that night, which he had not disclosed to her. Lindsay was drawn to that brass bed, in that blue-painted bedroom; for once, Colin showed no haste to be there. They sat in front of the wood fire, in the small beamed sitting-room, drinking a delicious wine which Colin said was a Bordeaux, and Lindsay kept calling a Burgundy. As midnight approached, Colin grew more

and more tense; his face became pale and fixed and his replies increasingly distracted.

Eventually, as midnight struck, he rose to his feet, and taking her hand, pulled her upright.

'It's Sunday now,' he said. 'It's the first Sunday in Advent. I'm going to show you Shute now. I want - I'd like you to see it by moonlight.'

Lindsay was moved by his expression and by the fact that he had evidently planned this. Had she ever doubted how much this meant to him, those doubts would have vanished now. She had never seen him more serious; she could sense his agitation and she could see his determination to conceal it.

It was cold outside; the air was fresh and still, and a light rain was falling. They put on coats and boots and scarves. Colin took her hand in his and, as before, held it inside his coat pocket. They set off down the track from the house, Colin refusing to use a flashlight. Her eyes would grow used to the darkness, he said, and Lindsay, unused to walking in the dark anywhere, and certainly unused to walking in the dark in the country, found this was so. The moon, high, round and seeming in constant motion as small clouds moved across its face, gave easily enough light. There was no colour; it was like walking through a negative. The moon silvered the track ahead of them and gave to the familiar - a hedge, a post - a fleeting, fluctuating shape she found restful. Above them, there was a myriad of stars; the only sounds were their footsteps and the calling of the owls. The air smelled of earth, of the rain and of woodsmoke. Lindsay felt tranquillity steal into her mind; the world of cities, planes, cars, appointments and people, fell away from her. Claspings Colin's hand and looking at him with love, she felt they breathed in truth and breathed out contentment.

Then Colin, taking her hand more tightly, drew her away from the track and into a small wood. There,

Lindsay's moonlit confidence began to desert her. In part, this was because, used to cities, the wood itself unnerved her. Here, there was less light, the moon shining through the branches and illuminating the ground only in patches. The undergrowth was thick; from all sides came tiny sounds she could not identify. The rain dripped and pooled the path; there were constant rustling, scurrying noises, and she had to keep telling herself that these were caused by the harmless nocturnal activities of small animals. Rabbits, weasels, she said to herself, and then acknowledged the truth: these sounds were not causing her fears; her fear was for Colin. She was afraid, very afraid, that when she finally saw this house of his, she would betray a reaction that would hurt and disappoint him.

This is his *home*, she kept saying to herself; he cannot help his home. It is the place where he grew up; he loves it; it is as cruel and wrong to shun it as it would be if he had grown up in some slum tenement.

Yet this argument did not altogether convince. She must try to imagine this house, she thought, then she would be prepared, and could, if need be, feign her reaction. By then, her mind had already laid out that park, the terrible perfection of that park; now she must try to face the house itself. She knew it would not be quite large, but very large; she immediately made that adjustment to Colin's statement. She found she could begin to see this very large house, this mansion. It was perched up, she discovered, on some eminence. It was grey, austere, grand; its architectural style was both classical and assertive. She felt this house might well resemble Mansfield Park, or perhaps that great edifice, Mr Darcy's Pemberley. On the other hand it might look, dear God, like Brideshead, or Thrushcross Grange, or Manderley. It would be like all of these places, she thought, in that it exacted a charge from intruders such as herself who crossed its threshold. That charge was a

male child, a son for the son, an heir for the heir; the hidden aspect of his house, Colin had not mentioned once. She wondered now, for she could feel how tense and anxious he was, whether he would ever be able to bring himself to mention it. She looked towards him; she knew he loved her; with pain, she accepted that on this subject he would remain utterly silent.

'Through here,' Colin said. He held out his hand to her. 'Let me help you over the stile.'

They had reached the edge of the wood at last. The moon, veiled by some ragged scrap of cloud, was revealing nothing. Ahead of her, Lindsay thought she could glimpse something still – and something moving. She gave Colin her hand and climbed over. She stepped down onto soft grass, cropped by animals. Colin put his arm around her shoulders and turned her a little. He raised his fingers to his lips; Lindsay peered into shadows and tried to make substance of shadows. A light gust of wind washed soft rain against her face; the clouds stayed still and the moon moved, bestowing radiance.

At first, Lindsay did not see the house. She saw that there was a river, wide and swift-flowing, curving along a valley. Ahead of her, beneath the spreading branches of a tree, a group of roe deer were grazing. She could see the females, heads bent to the grass, the moonlight greying the lovely curves of their necks and flanks. A little apart, head lifted and alert, there was a stag; she just glimpsed the branching of his antlers, then he scented their presence, and with one accord, moving at a speed like a single creature, the herd ran off. She listened to the soft drumming of deer hooves; following the deer's passage with her eyes, she found she was looking at Shute.

It was not as she had expected. It was not set up upon an eminence, but lay against the side of the hill, as if it had gradually grown up from the ground over the centuries. There was, at one end of its irregular outline,

an attempt at a fortification, for there was some form of tower or gatehouse there. Leading away from this was a long quiet frontage, which had a collegiate or monastic look. It had glorious ranked windows which the moon made silver and mercurial; she could see square bays; she glimpsed curved gables, gentle stone embrasures, clustering and fantastic chimney-pots; and, seeing a house built not for display, but for the quiet delights of domesticity, she gave a low cry of unfeigned pleasure.

'Oh, it's beautiful,' she said. 'Colin, I never imagined it would be this beautiful . . .'

Colin, who had been watching her face with the utmost intentness, gave a sigh. All the tension left his body. His heart, which he was sure had stopped beating for some while, now began to beat strongly.

'It's the most romantic house in England,' he said, looking at it with love. 'At least, so it's been said . . .'

'Who said that?' Lindsay asked, still staring at the house. 'They were right; it *is* romantic. It's wildly romantic . . .'

'I think it was William Morris,' Colin said, 'or it might have been Ruskin.'

One of them, Colin thought, had said something roughly similar. He hesitated; oversell, he knew, could be fatal.

'Oh, what's that glorious tower thing at the end, Colin?'

'Well, it's a gatehouse really. A tower-shaped sort of gatehouse.'

'I love towers. I love gatehouses.'

'That's medieval.' Colin was beginning to feel more encouraged. 'It's the only part of the original house that's left. Various Lascelleses kept adding bits. They had this compulsion to *build*. Apart from the gatehouse, what you're looking at now is mostly late Tudor and partly Jacobean.'

'Oh,' Lindsay gave a long sigh. 'It was there at the

time of the Armada. When Shakespeare was writing his plays. Mary, Queen of Scots was alive then. Raleigh was discovering his New World . . .'

'Yes,' said Colin, feeling this was a fairly accurate summation.

'It has a Wars of the Roses sort of look too,' Lindsay went on. 'And I can just imagine crusaders riding off to fight the Saracens . . . from the gatehouse, that is.'

'Definitely,' said Colin, who by then was inclined to agree to anything.

'I shouldn't be in the least surprised if Henry VIII didn't stay here, with Anne Boleyn.' Lindsay gave a deeper sigh. 'While he was still in love with her, of course. Some years before he chopped off her head.'

Colin hesitated then. To this, the purist in him could not consent. Anne Boleyn, executed in 1536, was, strictly speaking, unlikely to have visited a house the construction of which commenced some fifty years later. On reflection, he felt he could stretch a point.

'More than possible,' he said. 'Maybe he composed *Greensleeves* for her here . . . You never know.'

'Colin, my dates aren't that bad. I'm teasing you.' Lindsay turned to look at him. He saw she had tears in her eyes. 'I'm teasing you and I'm not teasing you. And it's lovely - so very lovely.' She paused. 'I don't think it frightens me, after all. I thought it might, you see. I thought it might be, you know, grand. Regimented. Marble halls. Great staircases . . .'

'I love you,' said Colin, realizing the wisdom of showing her the house from this side and at night. He need not mention the large eighteenth-century wing, invisible from here, until the morning, he decided. William Kent's contributions to the house, he felt, were better approached with circumspection. Lindsay would cope with Kent, he was sure, in time. After all, she was prepared to forgive his money and his ancestors. If he could ensure that his careful plans for the rest of the

partly because she was distracted by the room's various noticeable oddities. These included a line of walking boots, stout shoes and gumboots sufficient in number to have shod the feet of a small army; a mountain of binoculars, field glasses and small telescopes; a bowl, one eye open and one shut, perched on the back of a chair by the fireplace, and, in a cardboard box lined with newspaper, a small hedgehog, which smelled pungently.

'My father has a bit of a thing about wildlife,' said Colin, looking at her with hope. 'When he's not watching birds, which he does most of the time, he's rescuing things. Like that hedgehog. The gardener – someone found him the other day. He should be hibernating. Daddy's been making him a new hibernating nest; he goes back in it tomorrow.'

Lindsay was undone. Afterwards, she was never sure whether to blame the hedgehog, or Colin's use of the word 'Daddy', which had slipped past his guard and caused him to blush crimson. Hiding her face, she bent over the hedgehog box. The hedgehog, not fully grown, was curled up in a ball, and was slowly beginning to bristle. Lindsay, who knew herself to be a sentimentalist with a weakness for all animals, particularly small ones, looked at the beauty of its spines. They were darker at the tip, paler at the base. Touching them with one finger, she found they felt soft and vulnerable, except at the tip. If Colin does not say anything about fleas, she thought – most people, in her experience, could not mention hedgehogs without mentioning fleas in the next breath – it will be a *sign*: I shall know I am right about Colin.

Colin, watching her with a tender expression, said nothing about fleas. Lindsay waited. Minutes ticked. He still said nothing about fleas. The hedgehog, having decided the possible threat had retreated, lowered its spines and uncurled; Lindsay saw its sharply pointed

snout, its black nostrils. It made a snuffling noise, retreated the snout and went back to sleep. "I must" acknowledged the truth; not that she knew. "I must" had known that for some while, but she had not been in the right way - that being, as she said, "the way" would know, a nice but very different

Now there was nothing in it. The straightening. She looked in the hall. She was aware. The chequer-board of white and black. She vaguely perceived that there was an air of mystery, that there was an air of mystery, that two rough-haired dogs had now appeared, and were now appearing.

She watched them lie down and they gave small yelps and could not even see the rest of the room. He was forward wearing had a much to be got - describing gaze. He low extremely the room

The image shows a document page, likely a ledger or a form, with many horizontal lines. The text is mostly illegible due to the high contrast and noise. There are some large black areas on the left side of the page, possibly representing redacted information or damage to the original document. The overall appearance is that of a heavily degraded or scanned document.

weaponry, and the Long Gallery, flanked with too many portraits of too many ancestors, a *surfeit* of ancestor could safely wait until the morning. So he took her up to his rooms by a winding back stair, pointing out to her only those small things he felt would please her – the old pane of glass on which, in 1672, a lover had scratched with a diamond the initials of his mistress; the bedcurtains in his room, which had been embroidered and stitched with consummate skill by some latter-day Lascelles wife who had had the patience of a Penelope.

Lindsay, entering his bedroom and admiring the bedcurtains *en passant* – she herself hated to sew – saw that the room was at the very top of the house and was open to the roof, with the rafters exposed and the great structure of its beams and king-posts visible. This delighted her. Colin, thankful that his windows faced south, thus giving no view of the more dangerous classical wing of his home, told her that when she woke in the morning, she would look out at the river.

Lindsay, who had not taken her contraceptive pills for two nights, not since that walk back through the snow from the Conrad, was pleased by this. She had no intention of taking those powerful chemicals again and, feeling that she was giving herself up to the equally powerful forces of nature, she liked the idea that the first thing she would see from these windows was the flow and currents of water.

She was aware that this strategy – like most of her strategies – was unreliable and could not be continued indefinitely. If she conceived, well and good; she would then be in no doubt as to her next action. If she did not conceive, and Gini's predictions proved true, then she would have to find a way to leave Colin. So she would have to determine a time limit, she thought, as Colin drew her down beside him on the bed. Six months? A year? No, a year was too long, she thought; a year with Colin and she was afraid she would never have the

will-power to disengage from him. Six months then, she thought, as Colin kissed her. Perhaps seven, she thought a minute later. Here, of course, was the right and perfect place to conceive his child, she thought a minute after that, though, in truth, this idea had first occurred to her somewhat earlier.

Moving against him, she began to say and do some of the marvellous things that Colin, alone in Emily's apartment all those weeks before, had hoped for and imagined. And Lindsay, who had always believed in those forces to which Jippy, in New York, had addressed his prayers and his spell, conjured them in her mind now, as, after delays sweet to both of them, Colin came into her body.

The following day was bright, cold and clear. Lindsay was introduced to Colin's father, whom she found brusque, possibly kindly, and certainly intimidating. With Colin, she attended church – in her case for the first time in many years – where, to a congregation of eight, in freezing conditions, a sermon was preached on the subject and significance of Advent, and Colin's father, moustache bristling, read the lesson with considerable bravura.

After Sunday lunch was completed, father and son exchanged a glance which Lindsay failed to notice. Colin announced, in a somewhat mysterious, evasive way, that he had one or two people he ought to see. Lindsay was never sure how the two men contrived this, but five minutes later, she was sitting talking to his father, and trying to think of some possible subject of conversation with this brisk, alarming, soldierly man, while Colin unbeknownst to Lindsay, was steering his fast and exquisitely engineered car in the direction of Oxford.

As he drove, at speed, with skill, Colin ~~rehearsed~~ sentences. These sentences proved ~~less easy to recall~~ than his demanding car, he ~~was~~ ~~going~~ ~~to~~ ~~drive~~

wheel-spin, drift and skid; the results were unfortunate. 'Tom,' he muttered, 'it is your mother whom I wish to marry. Tom, your mother and I . . .' No good, no good, Colin thought. Try again; concentrate. 'Tom, for some time now, it has been my hope to . . .'

No good either, Colin thought, becoming desperate. Why had this appalling pomposity descended on him? He was starting to sound like some ghastly suitor in a nineteenth-century novel. Loosen up, he thought; be cool and relaxed, modern and casual. 'Hi, Tom, how are things? Just thought I'd let you know. I've asked Lindsay to . . . Lindsay and I are . . .' Asked Lindsay to what? Colin was now sweating. He could not think of any appropriately cool, relaxed modern usage. Shackle up with me? Get hitched? Tie the knot? Get spliced? Worse and worse, Colin thought; either he sounded like an ageing hippie or like Bertie Wooster.

Start again, he thought, zipping around the Headington roundabout. Keep it simple. 'Tom, I want to marry your mother. Tom, I have asked Lindsay to marry me. Tom, I am deeply in love with your mother, otherwise known as Lindsay, and I want to marry her. I want you to give us your blessing, and tell me what in hell I can do to get her to accept me.'

This was an improvement, Colin thought. At least it was honest. He could refine this, bang it about a bit, get it into some sort of shape. 'Tom, I am very deeply in love . . .' Very, very deeply in love? Fathoms deep in love?

Get a hold of yourself, Colin thought, swerving violently. He realized that he was now in Tom's street, and his nerve had entirely failed him. He slowed to a crawl. The words jammed in his brain. He began to see that this expedition was the most foolish of mistakes. It was an error of judgement of colossal proportions. On the last occasion he had seen Tom, the *only* occasion he had seen Tom, he had been drunk . . . face facts,

paralytic. Tom was unlikely to have forgotten this. Supposing Tom turned around and said he had never heard a worse, a more fatuous suggestion in his life? What was he supposed to do then? Ignore Tom, or just crawl away and die somewhere?

He stopped the car outside Tom's house, but did not turn off the engine; he sat there for some minutes in a state of indecision and panic. He told himself this meeting was better postponed. Tom, according to the telephone call with Lindsay the previous night, was working flat out on an essay on the philosophical background to Fascism. He was toiling through *Also Sprach Zarathustra* and tackling Nietzsche's concept of *Übermensch*. For this reason, Tom had put off Lindsay's suggestion of meeting. *Übermensch*? This essay now seemed to Colin a most excellent reason for driving away again. He was just about to release the brake, engage the gears and go, when he had the sensation – the very odd sensation – that someone had just tapped him on the shoulder.

So precise was this sensation that he actually glanced around. There was, of course, no-one behind him. He hesitated. The someone who had tapped his shoulder was now drawing his hand towards the ignition keys. Colin turned the engine off. The invisible someone, he found, was now urging him to get out of the car. Realizing that this invisible person must be his conscience, telling him not to plan something, then fulfil it, Colin did get out of the car. He found himself encouraged up the path; in an encouraging way, just as he was about to ring Tom's doorbell, the door was opened for him. A young woman – it was Cressida from-upstairs – paused in the doorway.

On learning that this tall, anxious-looking, handsome man wanted to see Tom, she let him in, started to leave herself, then paused.

'The thing is . . .' She gave a frown. 'He's in a b

of a state. Did you know? Are you a friend of his?"

'I'm a friend of his mother's. A state?' Colin frowned. 'That's odd. She spoke to him last night - said he sounded fine then . . .'

'Well, I guess he would - to his mother. You know how it is.' She made a face. 'He doesn't want people to know, but he and Katya had this horrible fight last Thursday, when he got back from Edinburgh. In fact, they've split up, and Tom's pretty miserable. I'm worried about him. I tried to talk to him last night, but he wouldn't say a word. I tried this morning, but he wouldn't even open his door. So, like, take it easy with him . . .'

She went out, closing the door behind her. Colin saw that now was not the moment to start discussing Lindsay and proposals. The best thing to do, he decided, was to go back to Shute, collect Lindsay, and bring her over here. He turned towards the front door, and again felt that discernible tug from that invisible hand. The hand seemed to propel him to the stairs. After more hesitation, Colin went up them.

He paused on Tom's landing. He could hear music coming from rooms on the upper floors; he thought he recognized a Mozart opera, just discernible beneath the heavy beat of some rock group. Then he realized that from beyond Tom's door came the sound of a man crying.

'Tom?' he said, in a low voice. 'Tom? Are you in there?'

There was no reply. Colin felt a mounting concern. He knocked on the door. 'Tom, I know you're in there,' he said. 'It's Colin Lascelles. I need to see you urgently . . .' He tried the door, which was locked. 'Tom, could you open this door, please?'

There was silence, then the sound of a chair moving. 'Go away,' Tom said indistinctly. 'Just go away, OK?'

Colin hesitated. He thought he ought to go away; he

also thought he ought to stay. The more he thought about it, the more important it seemed to remain and get into the room. Tom, virtually fatherless, had struck him as volatile when he met him; he thought of how he himself had been at Tom's age, in the wake of his brother's death. He thought of how he, at this age, had swung wildly from one extreme to another, and how, on bright mornings like this one, he had got up, looked at the day, and started drinking.

He knocked on the door again. 'Tom, I'm not leaving. I must talk to you. Now open this door . . .'

'Fuck off.' There was a painful sound. 'Just fuck off and leave me alone . . .'

Colin considered. Three days ago, had this happened, he would either have left to fetch Lindsay, or gone in search of a landlady and a key, or made foolish threats about breaking down the door. He had been shown, however, that there were quicker approaches – and speed mattered; he could now sense urgency.

Blushing scarlet, he said, 'Tom, there's been an accident. Now open this door at once.'

There was a brief silence, then footsteps, then the sound of a key turning. Colin took one quick look at Tom's face and pushed past him before he could shut the door. He glanced around the room, which was in a state of chaos. The cerise sofa was without its Indian throw, which was crumpled in a corner. The bed in the alcove was unmade. There were papers and books all over the floor – and there was something else, something that caught his eye as he turned back to Tom, but he was too distressed by Tom's appearance to take in its significance.

Tom might be his own height, but he now looked like a boy rather than a man, Colin thought. He was unshaven; his eyes were swollen, and his face was white and tear-stained. He was looking at Colin with an expression of fear and bewilderment.

'What's happened?' he said. 'What's happened? Is Mum all right? I only spoke to her last night . . . Oh, *Christ*.'

'Nothing's wrong,' Colin replied quickly, 'there was no accident. I couldn't think of any other way to get you to open the door, and—'

He broke off, seeing a furtive ashamed look cross Tom's face. Slowly, he turned and re-examined those objects on the table that had caught his eye. There was no mistaking their purpose. He turned back sharply to Tom and the boy's face crumpled. He gave Colin a blind, miserable look and drew in an unsteady breath.

'It's OK,' he said. 'I wanted to, but I couldn't even fucking well do that.' He began to cry again.

'Katya said I was useless – and she's right. I bought the fucking drink and the fucking pills, and then I couldn't do it. I've sat here for three hours looking at them – and I couldn't take them . . .' He pushed past Colin, fumbled for a chair and sat down on it. 'You know where she's gone? She's taken the train to London. She's gone to see fucking Rowland McGuire. She thinks she's in love with him . . .'

Quietly, Colin moved across to the table. On it was a notebook with some pencilled message and numerous crossings-out. 'Dear Mum,' Colin read. He passed his hand across his face. Next to the notebook was a full bottle of vodka, and laid out in rows, very neatly, was a large number of white pills. The boxes they had been taken from were stacked neatly to one side.

Colin was very afraid; he looked at the pills, then at Tom.

'This is paracetamol,' he said. 'Paracetamol, not aspirin. Have you taken any?'

'No. I told you—'

'You're sure? Look at me, Tom. If you've taken any, I have to know—'

'I haven't. Not one.' Tom gave him a frightened look. 'Count them if you like. They're all there . . .'

Colin counted them; they were all there. He found he was not only afraid, but very angry.

'Do you know what happens to people who take paracetamol overdose?' he said. 'They die. It doesn't work, using a stomach-pump on them, as it can do with aspirin. It's irrevocable. Paracetamol causes irrevocable liver damage. You could kill yourself with a quarter of that dosage, but you wouldn't die now; you'd die in a week's time. Did you know that?'

'No. I didn't.'

'Did you think of your mother? Tom, how could you do this? Did you think what it would do to her?'

'Look, I didn't take them. I didn't take *any* . . .'

'You thought about it. You sat here and you wrote a note. 'Dear Mum.' How could you? *How?* You're her only child. She loves you so much . . .'

He looked around the room. 'Where's the phone? I'm calling your mother right now . . .'

'No, don't do that.' Tom sprang to his feet. 'Please don't do that. I don't want her to know . . .'

'Too bad. You should have thought of that before I'm not hiding this from her.'

'Please – *please*.' Tom caught at his arm. 'Don't do that. Let me explain – I wouldn't have done it. Really. I just – I couldn't *think*. I've been walking round Oxford for two days, trying to think, and I couldn't. Nothing made *sense*. It was just all this fucking awful horrible mess. Katya said all these horrible things – and I couldn't believe she'd said them. I kept thinking, it's all a dream. I'm going to wake up in a minute. And this morning I went round to her college this morning. She told me to get lost. She had this *mad* look on her face. She went on and on about him, Rowland this, Rowland that, how he could kill him. She's been writing to him. I *know* he's been writing back . . . and I thought, I'll show her . . .'

He rubbed at his eyes and began to cry again. 'I kept thinking she'd come in, and see all that stuff – and then she'd see how much I loved her. Only she didn't come and I'd locked the door anyway. Oh *shit* . . .'

Colin hesitated; it seemed to him that he ought to call Lindsay, and at once. But he could feel it again, that small odd tug at his sleeve. With a sigh, he did what seemed most natural and useful to do: he put his arm around a boy he scarcely knew, as if he had known him all his life. Gently, he steered him to the sofa and sat down next to him. He looked anxiously at Tom.

'You give me your word you didn't touch any pills. There aren't any other boxes hidden away?'

'None. I swear. It was just an idea; a *gesture*. That's all I'm capable of – fucking *gestures* . . .'

'I don't believe that,' Colin replied in a quiet voice. 'Not taking that amount of paracetamol shows remarkable good sense. Now why don't you tell me what happened? Go back to the beginning, and when you're finished, I'll call Rowland.' He paused. 'I know you never have no worries on that score, Tom. Whatever mad idea Kayta may have got into her head, Rowland won't have encouraged her . . .'

'You're sure?'

Colin was *not* sure. True, he could not imagine Rowland leading Kayta on, but if she had actually gone to see him, if she turned up on his doorstep? Katya was young; she was noticeably attractive. Thinking of Rowland's past, he felt doubts, and knew it was vital to conceal them. 'Has she gone to his house, Tom?'

'That's what she said she was going to do. Oh, *Christ*. She'll be there now. You don't know Katya – you don't know what she's like. She reads all these fucking books. She thinks she's *in* a book half the time . . .'

'I'm sure Rowland will cope with that. I know exactly what he'll do. He'll give her one of his ticking-offs – and they're not pleasant, I can tell you. Then he'll put her

on a train and send her packing, which will almost certainly bring her to her senses . . .’

‘It won’t make her love me again though, will it?’ Tom bent his head. He wiped the back of his hand angrily across his eyes. ‘She doesn’t fucking care any more. She said . . .’

He glanced towards the bed and began crying again. Colin put his arm around Tom’s shoulders. He produced one of his Thalia-scorned handkerchiefs and handed it across.

‘Start at the beginning,’ he said, ‘and remember, people don’t always mean what they say in these circumstances.’

‘They don’t?’

‘I certainly hope not,’ Colin replied. ‘Considering some of the things that have been said to me in the past. Now, how did this begin, Tom?’

‘When I got back from Edinburgh, she just went mad – totally *mad*. She’d written this mad note . . .’ He blew his nose. Looking at Colin fiercely, he drew in a steadying breath.

‘I’ll never love anyone else, you know,’ he said. ‘*Never*.’

Colin was careful not to disagree. ‘Of course that’s how you feel,’ he said. ‘Now, you talk and I’ll just sit here and listen. And then we’ll find a way to sort this out, I promise you.’

‘Rowland, I love you,’ Katya said. She cleared her throat. ‘I want you to be very clear about this. Of course, I still love Tom. In many ways, I shall *always* love Tom, but I love Tom in this quiet, peaceful, everyday sort of way, whereas, with you . . .’

Katya paused. She had been rehearsing this difficult speech the whole way to London on the train. Now she was actually here, in Rowland McGuire’s strange, spartan house, it seemed more difficult to say. She had

hoped that, by this point in her speech, Rowland might have *done* something.

He had done and said nothing. She had been admitted into the house with considerable reluctance, and only after she had burst into tears on the front step. She had been shown up to this cold, unwelcoming room with these photographs of ugly mountains. She had been there less than five minutes before she realized that unless she embarked on her speech, she was going to find herself out on the pavement again. Rowland was now leaning up against the mantelpiece, his arms folded; his green eyes rested on her face in a manner that was not encouraging. Katya flushed.

'With you,' she continued, 'it's *different*. It came to me very suddenly. It was that day I met you in Oxford. It was something Miriam Stark said. Learn to *read*, she said. So, after you left, I started reading this novel.' She paused again, half hoping Rowland would ask her which novel; he did not.

'I found I could read it – and I could also read myself. And you. I know what you *need*, Rowland. I know what you *want*.'

'Really? You have the advantage of me there.'

'I want to go to bed with you, Rowland.' Katya's colour deepened. 'You may not realize that you want to go to bed with me yet, but you will. I want you to understand . . .' She paused, trying to recall her script. 'I know it won't be *permanent*; it will just be an affair. And when it's over, I'll go away quietly; I won't pest you, or anything like that. I know that in your case it will be just – you know – *sex*, but from my point of view it's something I *need* – at this moment in my life.'

Katya paused again. Rowland, she felt, must surely now speak. There was a second part to her speech, much concerned with the nature of love, its dynamics and Katya's theories on these dynamics – which were numerous. There was a coda to this speech that dealt with sub-

questions as twin souls, fate, sudden attraction, and the consequences thereof: looking at Rowland's green eyes Katya decided to skip this section. While it had made great sense on the train to tell Rowland that she had realized he was the love of her life, it now did not.

She looked more closely at the expression in those eyes, which might have been lazily amused.

'Are you laughing at me?' she said. 'This isn't funny. It's not easy, you know, doing this.'

'I agree it's not funny, and I'm certainly not laughing at you. Have you finished? I did say I'd hear you out.'

'Look.' Katya struggled. 'Look - I know you're a lot older than I am. I know you won't be used to this kind of thing, but I think a woman should say what she *feels*. What's the point of going through life covering everything up? I *love* you. I came up today to tell you that. If you like, we can go to bed now, and then I'll go back to Oxford. You'll never hear from me again. I've got a day return ticket, just in case.'

Rowland gave a sigh. He wondered if Katya could possibly imagine the number of times this had happened to him before. The women were different; the words were different; the intention was the same. This, of course, was the very last thing to mention.

He looked at Katya. She was wearing the workman's donkey jacket again, a man's shirt, jeans and a pair of Doc Marten boots. He found himself both moved and amused by this. He was moved and amused by the combination of posturing and sincerity in her expression and voice. She was now examining him closely with her large, blue, short-sighted eyes. Her hair, which was beautiful, the colour of a fox, was loose on her shoulders. She had freckles on her nose and cheekbones; her hands, he saw, were unsteady. He could see that what she said she both meant and did not mean.

He glanced away towards the windows. It was mid-afternoon, and the light was already beginning to fade.

Three nights ago, he had been at the Conrad; he spent most of the following day, the Friday, on a plane, and the whole of the following day, yesterday, at his newspaper to press. He felt as if he had not slept a month, and he had realized, shortly before Katya's unannounced arrival, that, without doubt, a Sunday was the cruellest day of the week. Most people spent their days with their families. In the past, he had often spent this day, or part of it, with Lindsay. Such meetings now cease. This prospect pained him; he found himself at a loss. In a familiar city, in his own home, he felt as if he were distanced and disoriented; whatever this was, its atmosphere was alien.

On this planet, it seemed, anything could happen at any moment; its rules were arbitrary. Temptation came to him at three in the afternoon, in the shape of a girl wearing Doc Marten boots, a girl with a return ticket and a wish to seduce him. This apparition, he felt, made him feel very tired. He had the sensation that if he turned away, then looked back, Katya would vanish in a twinkling. He looked back; she had not vanished, but no speech was necessary.

'Katya, I'm sorry,' he began, 'I'm touched by what you say, and flattered, obviously, but you must know that you're out of the question . . .'

'Why?' Katya became pale. Before Rowland could answer, she undid the man's shirt she was wearing and began crying. She hesitated, then parted the shirt to reveal a black, lacy, seductive brassière.

'You won't *look* at me,' she cried, tears welling. 'I can never do. Well, I'm going to *make* you look at me, Rowland. Oh, God, I'm so bloody miserable. I don't know what to do. I can't *think*. Tom said I looked mad. I *feel* as if I might as well go and jump in the Thames. I nearly did this afternoon. I went and stared at the Thames for hours, but I couldn't find the right place to jump in. It was low tide and there was all this *mud* . . .'

She made a wailing sound; large tears fell down her face. Rowland found that somehow – he was never sure how it happened – he had put an arm around her. The next thing he knew, Katya's tears were being wept against his shoulder.

'I want to *die*,' she said, indistinctly. 'I could die of *shame*. You don't fancy me, do you? I'm fat. I'm undesirable. I've made an idiot of myself. Oh, this is horrible. Why did I come here? Why was I so horrible to Tom? I threw all these books around. We stayed up all night, arguing and arguing, and I drank all this wine and said these horrible, cruel things . . . Rowland, I could feel this *storm* – there wasn't a storm, but I could hear *under*. I kept seeing these flashes of *lightning* . . .'

Rowland made a sympathetic noise. In an awkward way, he patted, then stroked, her back. He found himself in a quandary. He was in no doubt as to how he should now behave: he should calm Katya down, talk to her in a kind, fatherly way, and, with the utmost firmness and tact, get her out of his house and back to Oxford. His course of action was totally clear to him; however, on this planet he was presently visiting, other factors seemed to be influencing him. He was finding himself distracted by the warmth and proximity of Katya's body by her tears, and – not least – by her breasts. He couldn't quite forget that glimpse of the black, lacy brassière. Katya was neither fat, nor undesirable; the bared skin of her chest had proved to be pale, beautiful and dusted with freckles. She had a slim waist, a strong young back and her skin had a faint, pleasant nostalgic scent that, which Rowland thought might come from talcum powder.

Despite her words, she had contrived to put her arm around his neck, and her breasts were pressing against his chest. It was some while since Rowland had slept with a woman; the misery of the day was acute, and he was, he thought, only human. Katya had truly beautiful

hair, he realized, laying his hand against it, hesitating, then beginning to stroke it.

He was just about to tilt Katya's face up to his when he had the sensation – the very odd sensation – that someone had just tugged his sleeve. So strong was this sensation that he looked down; but no, as he had known they were, Katya's arms were clasped about his neck. There was, of course, no-one else in the room and no-one standing next to him.

He found he was now looking down at Katya. She had stopped wailing and crying as suddenly as she had begun, and was now regarding him in an alert, desperate way. Her eyes were lovely, Rowland thought; her mouth was lovely.

'I wish you'd kiss me, Rowland,' she said. 'Just a very brief kiss. Just *once* . . .'

It seemed to Rowland that, indeed, one brief kiss would do no harm. He hesitated. The telephone began ringing. On its third ring, understanding that he had been rescued, Rowland gently released Katya, told her to do up her blouse, crossed the room and answered this lonely call. The caller proved to be Colin Lascelles. He did not mention alcohol or pills, but he explained where he was; he spoke for some time and he spoke with emphasis.

'Quite,' Rowland said, several times. He glanced across at Katya, who was buttoning up her shirt. 'No. We got here about half an hour ago, Colin. We're just living now. I agree. Yes, she is rather upset. I'll drive her back to Oxford. I think that would be best.'

Rowland replaced the receiver. He looked at himself and disliked what he saw. 'That was Colin,' he said, coming from Tom's room.'

Katya blushed scarlet again. There was a silence. Katya, who as Rowland well knew, was by no means unintelligent, gave him a look which gradually became considering.

'Do you think I ought to go and see Tom now, Rowland?'

'No, I don't. I think you should give it a few days, Katya. Colin's taking him back to his place, anyway. Lindsay's there. Give yourselves a few days to think, and calm down a little . . .'

Katya gave him a sidelong glance; she departed.

Rowland drove around Oxford, feeling a curious reluctance to leave the city. He thought of how easy it was to give advice to others in such matters and how peculiarly difficult it was to act on such advice oneself. He thought of the time he had spent in this city, and of what he had done – and left undone – since he had lived here. He tried not to think of the fact that Lindsay was close by, yet out of his reach.

He drove around the one-way system six times. There were no tourists in Oxford at this time of the year; term was ending, undergraduates were departing. The darkness of a winter's evening gave to these beautiful college buildings a sweet melancholy. It came to him that he had no reason to hurry back to London, since no-one awaited him there. About to go around the one-way system for the seventh time, he changed his mind, parked the car with surprising lack of difficulty, and began walking. He walked through Christ Church meadows, and along the river bank, and found himself by the river swollen by rain, and dead leaves drifting. He walked for some way, then, hearing the chapel bells begin to ring, and the church bells start to toll the hour, he stopped, for as Tom had noticed, none of these things was synchronized, he turned back.

He had the sensation – the very odd sensation of being guided. This time, no invisible hand touched his sleeve, but his feet seemed to know where to take him. They led him back to the porters' lodge, he decided that, since he was in Oxford, it

'I do love Tom, you know.'

'Then learn to behave accordingly.'

Katya's colour deepened. 'OK, OK. I deserved that. I'll go. You don't have to drive me.'

'No, I will. I don't want any detours to the Thames.'

'I'm not really the suicidal type.' She paused. 'One question - how close, Rowland?'

'Too close for comfort.'

'I thought so.' Katya's face lit up in a brilliant smile.

'Well, that's *some* consolation.'

'Not for me it isn't.'

'So what do we do now, Rowland?'

'Now, Katya, you come downstairs, and you get in my car, and I drive you back to Oxford - which is an interruption I could well do without. While we're on the motorway, I'll give you a sensible fatherly talk. And you will behave yourself.'

'All right.' Katya frowned. 'I did mean what I said to you, Rowland.'

'No, Katya. I don't think you did mean it.'

'I shall feel awful tomorrow. I'll want to die of embarrassment and humiliation.'

'Don't. I should concentrate on Tom, if I were you. That's rather more important. Now get your coat. And Katya, be more careful which books you read in future.'

'All right, Rowland. I'll stick to Trollope.' Katya gave a small smile. 'All those clergymen. I should think that would be safe ...'

'Out. Now,' said Rowland.

In his car, true to his word, Rowland provided sensible fatherly advice. He produced Kleenex from the glove box when Katya hit another weeping phase. He drove at exactly the speed limit for the entire route - no more usual practice - and by the time he dropped Katya at her college, he realized he had never felt so critical and so ancient.

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been good for him here. He's better already. He'll never consider anything that foolish again, I'm sure of that . . .'

'I don't know that. He promised me, but I still—'

'Trust me.'

'Colin, I want him *near* me. I feel so afraid for him—'

'I know you want him near you,' Colin said quietly, 'but you have to know when he wants and needs something else. Let him have the chance to prove something to himself, Lindsay. That stupid girl hurt his confidence badly.'

'I mustn't even fuss, you mean?' Lindsay gave her new landlord a wry look.

'You can fuss a bit, but don't overdo it.'

Lindsay took this advice. Going out with Colin to his great car, which Tom was admiring, she saw her son's face tighten with apprehension. Guiltily, Lindsay realized that she was responsible for this. Tom was now expecting one of the endless epic motherly recitals which delayed all his departures. For the first time in his life, Tom was spared them; Lindsay abjured all the talismanic sentences which she had come to believe ensured her son's safety. She did not tell him to get enough sleep, to eat properly, avoid illness and accident, and call if there were the least problem. These, and many other imprecations, she said silently to herself; to him, she said only to take care, work hard, and enjoy himself.

This so astonished Tom that it silenced him completely. He and Colin were five miles down the road before he felt able to speak.

'How did you *do* that?' he said, looking at Colin, who, he noticed, drove fast and with great skill. 'How on *earth* did you do that?'

'I didn't do anything. Lindsay's getting used to the idea that you're a man now, that's all.'

'You're kidding.'

'Tom, don't be hard on her.' Colin hesitated. 'It's

because she had to bring you up alone. If she was anxious, well, she had no-one to share those anxieties with, so they got worse . . .’

‘You reckon?’

‘Oh, definitely. Anyway, all women are a bit like that. It’s a strength as well as a weakness. I promise you, Tom, my mother was exactly the same. She used to cry when she saw me off to school – I boarded when I was seven.’

‘Seven? Jesus.’

‘It’s only because she loves you. And, maybe, she hadn’t realized the effect it had on you. She . . . she—’ Colin struggled. ‘She has a very warm heart, Tom, and she can’t always disguise her feelings. And—’

‘And you love her, right?’ Tom grinned. ‘It’s OK, Colin. I kind of noticed.’

‘I want her to marry me. I want her to marry me *desperately* . . .’ Colin slowed. He looked towards Tom, his expression both desperate and woeful. ‘That’s why I came over to Oxford on Sunday. I wanted to – actually I’m not sure what I wanted to do. Ask your blessing . . .’

‘That’s cool. You’ve got it.’

‘Ask your *advice*.’ Colin groaned. ‘She won’t say yes, and if she doesn’t say yes soon, I’ll go *mad* . . .’

‘You want *my* advice?’ Tom blushed with pleasure. ‘Really? Wow!’ He gave a smile. ‘Well, with a normal woman the car alone would do it. I mean, if I was a woman and a man drove up in this, I’d say yes before he got out of it . . .’

‘That’s because you’re a man. Think female.’

‘OK, OK. Well, the house ought to help – but Mum’s not normal there either. She likes your Dad, I can tell, and that’s a plus factor. Hang on, I’m thinking . . .’ He frowned. ‘I mean, it’s weird – but then she is a bit weird. I can see she’s mad about you. Something happens to her face when she looks at you. I’ve never seen that happen before.’

‘Never? You’re sure?’

'Well, a bit, once or twice. She was keen on Rowland for a time . . .'

'I know, I know. Don't mention him, it doesn't improve my driving.'

'Oh, you don't have to worry about *that*,' Tom said in a negligent, dismissive tone. 'Rowland's all wrong for her. She knew that really. I mean, Rowland's fine as a friend, but can you imagine *living* with him? If she'd actually gone to bed with him, she'd have got over that in about a *week*, but she didn't. Rowland never fancied her anyway.'

'You're sure?' Colin looked at Tom in astonishment. 'He fool him.'

'Oh, he *liked* her,' Tom said in an airy way, 'and Rowland's getting a bit desperate – his age and still married – so maybe he persuaded himself it was more than that – I did think that, once or twice. When we had lunch in Oxford, for instance.' He gave Colin a sideways glance. 'But that was partly rivalry. I mean, he did see how you felt about Mum. Everyone at the time could except her. It stuck out a mile . . .'

'Did it?' Colin asked, 'Oh, God. *God*.'

'But you don't have to worry about Rowland. She never looked at him the way she does at you. So if you really want to marry her . . .'

'If?' Colin overtook three cars superbly. 'There are no "ifs" here, Tom. Advise me.'

Tom looked at Colin and considered. He now felt ten years older than when he'd got into this car. He was realising how much he liked this somewhat eccentric man. He was wondering if this man would be eccentric enough ever to let him drive the Aston Martin. He was wondering why he had not thought of Katya for over twenty hours, and whether that could be seen as a falling-off or as progress.

Deciding that, as step-fathers went, Colin might prove an exceptionally nice one, he sighed.

'Are you any good at chess?' he said.

'Not bad. Why?'

'Mum's appalling. I mean, so bad it's *awesome*. But there's something she does when she plays; it's just given me an idea . . .'

Tom spoke rapidly, for some minutes. Colin's eyes widened. 'You think so? You're sure? When?'

Tom frowned and considered again.

'When does this movie finish? End of February? Three months from now? That's about right. Go for March first . . .'

'Three months? I can't stand it . . .'

'*Festina lente*,' Tom said, surprising Colin. 'Trust me the first of March is perfect.'

A week later, in mid-December, Lindsay went up to London to help Pixie move into her own once much-loved apartment. This process did not take long, since Pixie's belongings consisted of a hi-fi system, some CDs, a budgerigar and a suitcase.

'Don't you have anything *else*, Pixie?' Lindsay said, as they deposited these in her former sitting-room. 'What about books? Clothes? Where are all your clothes?'

'Oxfam,' said Pixie.

She yawned, stretched, rearranged her red hair and executed a small jig.

'I'm beginning a new life. New apartment. New hair colour. New job. New clothes. New future.'

'How's the job working out?' Lindsay said, looking around her and feeling despondent.

'Brilliantly. Max says I'm the best fashion editor he's ever had. Except for you, obviously.'

'Oh, great. Terrific. Thanks a million.'

'And this place is a big improvement on that horrible hole I had . . . I might repaint it. Do you mind?'

'Feel free,' said Lindsay.

'You sure you want me to just rent? I'll buy it if you like. I'm getting into mortgages. *Gearing.*'

'No, you can't bloody well buy it.' Lindsay sat down. 'I may need it.'

'Is something the matter with you?'

'Yes. I'm post-menstrual.'

Post?

That's what I said.'

You're joking.' Pixie stared at her hard and long. 'I'm not hearing this.'

'I'm not joking. I was never more serious in my life. I love him. I love him desperately. I want his children.'

Pixie opened her mouth to protest, argue and exultate. She looked at Lindsay's face and closed it in.

'Plural?' she said, being nothing if not practical.

If possible. One would make me so happy, but if the other was female . . .'

Pixie felt she wanted to scream – loudly. Since she was so fond of Lindsay, she did not. She sat down beside him and took her hands.

Lindsay. Look at me,' she said with great sternness. 'Now tell me, is this for him or for you?'

Both.' She gave Pixie a look of misery. 'I can't help it. I'm just like that. I always was. There's this direct line between my heart and my womb. I'm a forward-back, Pixie. I'm *primitive.*'

Pixie agreed with this view, but forbore to say so, since Lindsay had now begun crying.

Oh, Pixie, I love him so much,' she said. 'I love him with all my heart. He's the most wonderful man. He'd make such a wonderful father. I know he needs an heir – but it isn't that really . . .'

I should hope *not*,' said Pixie, who disapproved of her progeniture and found this a very nineteenth-century predicament.

'He should have children. I know he wants them, but he won't say so – he's afraid of hurting me. He's afraid I'm too old – and so am I. Oh, what am I going to *do*? What am I going to *do*?'

Pixie thought for some while.

'Give me your dates,' she said. 'Right, now let's make the calculations here . . . When's he next down from Yorkshire?'

'Tomorrow. But only for about half a day . . .'

'Tomorrow's perfect. Half a day? What's the matter with you? You can fix this inside ten minutes.'

Pixie rose. She opened her suitcase, rummaged round inside and brought out a small white jar.

'Right,' she said. 'Now, you rub this stuff into your skin about half an hour *before*, OK? It's unbelievably expensive and it never fails. Believe me, Lindsay, this would fix it for an *eighty-year-old* woman . . .'

'What are you doing with it?'

'Sample,' Pixie said briskly. 'It came in to the Beauty Department the other day. I thought I could use it. It's an aphrodisiac as well . . .'

'I don't *need* an aphrodisiac. That's not the problem.'

'Lindsay, with this cream and no pill, you *conceive*. Believe me.'

'I don't believe you. It's so much quackery.'

'You put this on. You also wear an amber necklace – do you have an amber necklace? No? Well, buy one on your way home and *wear* it. Throughout. Don't take it off under any circumstances. Promise me now.'

'All right. I promise.' Lindsay smiled.

'That's better. Now – let's have a drink and I'll tell you all the gossip. You go first . . .'

'I don't *have* any gossip.' Lindsay sighed. 'I sit alone with all these books and papers and I do *research*. What else? I go to see Colin's father sometimes, or he comes

to see me. I like him very much. He talks in this antique way. He says, "By Jove". Yesterday, he brought me a puppy – it's the sweetest thing, Pixie. It has this brown fluffy fur, and these deep brown eyes. I may call it Jippy . . .'

Pixie smothered a yawn.

'Tom's much better. He's having a wonderful time in Berkshire. He and Colin are working an eighteen-hour day. I miss Tom. I miss Colin.' She hesitated. 'I live from one call to phone call, Pixie. From letter to letter. I love him so much – I dream my life away.' She gave a small sigh. 'I know you won't approve, but you'll understand one day . . .'

Pixie was very determined not to do so. She was, however, not as unaffected as she might have liked to be by the expression in Lindsay's eyes and by the way in which she spoke. She determined to change the subject quickly.

'Well, I can do better than that . . .' She poured two glasses of some terrible wine she had brought with her. She sat down on a cushion on the floor, stretched out her legs and made herself comfortable.

'First of all,' she began, 'you, Lindsay, are *dead* – did you know that? I met some terrible crazed PR woman, Lulu something, yesterday, and—'

'Lulu Sabatier? I don't *believe* it. That bloody woman hounded me for *months*. I told her I was dead . . . You actually *met* her? What does she look like?'

'Weird. Tall. Long white hair. About forty. Rabby rabbit. Australian accent – or could be New Zealand.'

'No!' Lindsay stared at her, recognizing the woman from that corridor at that party. 'But I met her! She gave me some other name. Why would she do that?'

'I tell you, she's *weird*. She kept rabbiting on about how much she'd liked you, how you'd gone down to her garden, or some crap. You know why she was hounding you? She represents that gruesome actor – what's his

name? The one that looks like a recently deceased choirboy . . .'

'Nic Hicks? I don't *believe* this.'

'That's the one. She thought you might want to use him in some male fashion feature, and now she thinks I might. Can he be that desperate for exposure?'

'Oh, yes. Without doubt.' Lindsay frowned. She thought back to Hallowe'en, to Lulu Sabatier's party, to that aircraft-carrier loft, and its magical garden.

'How odd,' she said. 'When she'd called thirty-five times, it did cross my mind it might have been important. The party was important – I see that now.'

'What?'

'Nothing. Go on.'

'Secondly – guess who Rowland and Max have signed up – exclusively? Pascal Lamartine, no less. Max says he's working on some book, but next year, once that's done, it's off to war zones again . . .' Pixie paused. 'I thought you said he'd given all that up for good . . .'

'He has. He's agreed to work for Rowland? That's not possible. It's totally *impossible*.'

'Wrong. It's signed and sealed. Apparently, Rowland approached him and Max clinched it . . .'

'Which war? I can't believe this . . .'

'Oh, there's always a war,' Pixie said airily. 'And now for the *really* interesting news: Rowland McGuire himself. Knock that back, Lindsay, you're going to need it. You may not believe this, but I hear . . .'

Lindsay listened for some while. A sadness crept upon her. She looked at the sofa on which she was sitting, the sofa where she and Rowland had sat talking, late at night, on their return from that lunch in Oxford. She thought of what they had both said then – and what they had not said. She could see now that it was one of many past moments when she, and also perhaps Rowland, had been haunted by a future that might have been.

and to which, briefly, they were close. It was just other side of a door, just around a corner – and a vestigial, imprecise, perhaps imagined, it would remain here. She bent her head; she found she could hear Rowland McGuire's voice, describing his Hebrides Hesperides.

'I wish him well,' she said quietly, when Pixie finished. 'I hope it's true. And oddly enough, Pixie have no trouble believing it.'

'Are you wearing a new scent? Darling, you smell wonderful,' Colin said, burrowing beneath the bedclothes in the brass bed, in the blue bedroom at Shallop Farm. He drew the blankets and the patchwork quilt over them.

'Mmmm,' said Lindsay. 'It's something Pixie gave me.'

'I like the necklace too. I like you wearing a necklace and nothing else . . . Is it the necklace? Or the scent? Or absence? Something's having a very powerful effect on me . . .'

'It's the necklace, I expect,' Lindsay replied, in a dreamy way. 'I bought it yesterday. It's that lovely dark amber. It's the colour of your hair, Colin. I wear it . . .'

Colin burrowed down further in the bed. With his hands he kissed her thighs, and the triangle of springy flesh between them, and her stomach, and her near-invisible stretch marks, and her breasts and her mouth. The stations of her body were all dear to him.

'Ah, I can't bear this,' he said. 'Darling – nearly five; it will be getting light. I'll have to leave soon.'

'Oh, don't go, don't go yet. I can't bear it either. Stay till dark. It can't be twelve hours yet . . .'

'It's twelve and a half. Lindsay, marry me—'

'Colin, I. Give me a little more time. I'm a little nervous.'

serious step . . . Darling, if you – oh, yes. Just like that. Oh, that feels so *right*. If you move just the smallest amount . . . Oh, that is the most miraculous thing which that happens to you. But we mustn't; not *again*. You mustn't be late . . .'

'Frankly, I don't give a damn,' said Colin.

'Happy New Year, Lindsay,' said Rowland McGuire, climbing out of his car and walking round to its passenger door. 'Can I say that, considering it's nearly the end of January? We made it – just. The roads from Oxford were very icy, and that track . . . Did you have a good Christmas?'

He kissed Lindsay, who had ventured out to meet him in the car, wrapped in several sweaters, a jacket and Colin's overcoat. Rowland stared at her. 'You're looking wonderful. You look – This place is obviously suiting you.' He paused as his passenger climbed from the car. 'Lindsay, this is Miriam. Miriam, this is Lindsay.'

The two women shook hands. It was Miriam Stark's first impression that this small woman, with her untidy hair and freckles, scarcely saw her. Her face was lit with an astonishing radiance. The cold air had made her cheeks pink; her eyes shone with an infectious happiness. Gesturing with her small hands in red woollen gloves, and talking away rapidly, she led them into the farmhouse.

With an obvious pride and delight in it, she settled Miriam and Rowland by a great fire, and began to rush back and forth fetching tea things. She had made a cake, she said, in their honour – but she wasn't very good at cakes, so this one was a little lopsided . . . It was some time before she paused for breath; by then, she had removed the layers of outer clothing and was standing by the fireplace, looking at them.

She was wearing flat leather boots, with a claret-coloured trousers tucked into them like a shirt. She was wearing a cardigan, a shirt and what

have been a man's tweed jacket. Around her throat was a dark amber necklace.

Miriam Stark, looking at her quietly, found her beautiful. She looked, Miriam thought, a little like a boy, a boy in travesty, and she reminded Miriam, who was steeped in Shakespeare, of a Viola, or a Rosalind. Every second sentence she uttered, Miriam noted, began with the name 'Colin'. When she pronounced this name she would colour a little and the light in her eyes would intensify. 'Holla your name to the reverberate hills,' thought Miriam, taking a piece of the lopsided cake which proved excellent.

Then, as the afternoon wore on and the light outside faded, her impressions of this woman began to shift a little. She was older than she appeared, Miriam realized, and probably, given her son's age, older than Miriam herself was. Though in this light she looked, with her short hair, impulsive manner and velveteen breeches, like some Elizabethan boy-actor, there was another quality to her joy which proclaimed the woman in her. Miriam could sense an uncertainty, a hope qualified by wistfulness, which she found moving. She wondered what might be the cause of this, and had the opportunity to continue these speculations, for she was a woman of few words herself, and in the company of strangers always said little.

She noticed that this Lindsay appeared hungry, yet ate little. She noticed that, from time to time, she rested her small hands across her stomach, just below her breasts. She was very slim and seemed unconscious of making the gesture, but to Miriam, who had once carried a child herself, the movement, half protective, half superstitious, was unmistakable.

She glanced at Rowland, wondering if he too would recognize it. He did not, she thought; he had become increasingly silent as the afternoon wore on, and seeing him avert his eyes from the radiance in Lindsay's face,

she realized suddenly that he was finding it virtually unbearable to be here. Pitying him, she rose to her feet and quietly suggested that they leave now.

'So, did you like her? I hope you did,' Rowland said, breaking a long silence in the car, when they were halfway between the farmhouse and Oxford.

'Very much. She is - transparent.' Miriam paused. 'I envy her that.' She paused again. 'I think she will not write her book however.'

'Probably not.' Rowland kept his eyes on the road. 'But I think she'll abandon it without regret - in the circumstances.'

'That cannot have been easy for you, Rowland,' Miriam ventured, after a further pause, turning her cool gaze towards him as he drove.

'No, but it will get easier eventually. I am still very . . .' He paused at an intersection. 'I am very fond of her, and I'm equally fond of Colin.'

'Describe this Colin. I look forward to meeting Colin.'

'He's excitable. He says "Oh, God, God, God" very often. And sometimes . . .' Rowland hesitated. 'Sometimes I have the sensation that God listens - which is strange, considering I'm an atheist. Colin - well, Colin has a good heart, apparent naïvety, and an instinct for the jugular. As you'd expect,' he added, in a dry way, 'considering his background.'

'And will she really marry him?' Miriam frowned. 'That vast house? All that money? Those possessions?' She gave an involuntary shiver. 'She must surely fear . . .'

'You saw her face. She's afraid of nothing.'

The interruption was curt; Rowland's tone, Miriam felt, could not disguise an emotion that might have been regret, but which she suspected came close to anguish. That tone, she found, affected her deeply. She said nothing.

They had reached the Headington roundabout and

the outskirts of the city; Rowland turned into Oxford. He could sense Miriam Stark's increase in tension before he had driven 100 yards.

'Where shall I drop you, Miriam?'

'At the college, please, Rowland.'

Rowland slowed the car.

'Why won't you let me come to your house?' he asked, in a quiet voice. 'Miriam, is there some reason for excluding me?'

'I exclude all men from my house. That is my policy.'

'That wasn't always the case. It wasn't the case fifteen years ago.'

'No.' She looked away. 'I was younger then. Now - I write my books at home. I prefer to keep that part of my life separate. I value that purity.'

'Very well. The college then.'

They drove on for some way in silence. Miriam Stark looked at Rowland's dark hair and at his profile. Knowing that she was being influenced by the joy seen in another woman's face, and knowing that she was contravening a resolve taken several weeks earlier, she said, 'Rowland, I will come with you to an hotel, if you like ...'

'I do like.'

'Then turn left here. We can go to the Randolph.'

'Lindsay, I want you to listen to me very carefully,' said Colin.

He was speaking to her on a mobile telephone, from one of the upstairs rooms of the perfect Wildfell Hall Rowland had found him. From this room, where he knew he was safe from interruption, he could see across the moorland that surrounded the house to the path that led down to the beach below. From this vantage point, he could just glimpse the further extremity of the beach; he looked at a crescent of pale sand and a still, calm sea. It had been his practice, these last months, when-

ever he could escape from the demands of filming, to walk on this beach and think of Lindsay. He had grown used to the hours of its tides; thinking of her, always with love, sometimes with impatience to be with her, and sometimes simply with yearning, he had found the regularity of these tides soothing. The tide was now coming in fast; the day was fine, with a scent of spring, and a sharp, late winter's sun was shining.

'Can you hear me, darling?' he said.

'I can hear you absolutely clearly, as if you were standing next to me.'

'What date is it today, Lindsay?'

'It's the twenty-eighth of February, Colin.' Her voice, Colin thought, sounded a little unsteady. 'And it's the last day of filming – unless Tomas Court has decided to go over . . .'

'He never goes over.'

'Then you're a free man in about – what? Two hours? Three hours?'

'Ten minutes,' said Colin. 'He says he's going to do this in one take – and I believe him. That means I'll be with you before dark. They're shooting the first scene of the movie now, then I'm leaving.'

'Why do they *do* that? Shoot inside out and back to front? It's confusing . . .'

'Not when you're used to it.' Colin drew in a deep breath. 'Darling, I'm going to ask you something that I first asked you on the telephone in a cottage not far from here. Lindsay, tell me – and by my calculations, this is for the thirty-fourth time of asking, are you going to marry me, yes or no, because in my pocket, at this moment . . .'

'Yes,' said Lindsay.

'I have – somewhere – ah, here it is, this special licence, which means that tomorrow, in Oxford, whether you consent or not, I'm taking you to . . . What did you just say?'

'I said yes,' said Lindsay.

Colin then became incoherent. She became incoherent. She decided to wait until he was with her before telling him that this would be, in effect, a shotgun wedding.

'Ten weeks,' said Lindsay, coming to the end of her confused, halting, hesitant explanation.

They were standing in the kitchen at Shute Farm, where Colin, having driven at fearless speed, but with the caution of a prospective bridegroom, had arrived half an hour earlier.

Listening to her explanation, Colin had blushed one of his agonizing blushes. His face was now white. He was hearing a tremendous rushing sound in the quiet of this room. Its power astonished him; it came to him, very slowly, that this sound indicated profound joy, a joy so overwhelmingly intense, it left him speechless. Moving towards Lindsay and taking her in his arms, he found speech did gradually return to him, so he could express, by word and by touch, the fears, hopes, desires and plans which sprang into his mind now – and that she, similarly gifted, could reply to them.

Some considerable while later, a father-to-be's panic came upon him. He felt that Lindsay should not be standing. He felt she might need to lie down; he felt she might need to eat – or possibly *not* to eat. He felt perhaps she needed fruit, or milk; he certainly felt – though he kept this to himself – that Lindsay must, at the earliest opportunity, be seen by Harley Street's most expensive, wise and infallible obstetrician. Was she sleeping? Could she rest? Did she have cravings? Colin hoped, with a fond, wild hope, that she had the most impossible of cravings – whatever she craved, he would obtain for her.

'Oh, God, God, *God*,' he said, striding up and down the kitchen, hitting his head on the beams several times,

and scarcely noticing. 'Darling, you must sit down. Put your feet up. Do you need a rug? Are you warm enough? You shouldn't have been *alone*. If I'd known, if I'd even *suspected*, I'd never have left you. Sod the movie. Sod Tomas Court. I'd have *been* here. Oh, God, God. Can we still get married tomorrow? It might be too much. All that stress. Women get stressed on their wedding days. Clothes! Flowers! They worry about things like that. I *told* Tom. Christ! Tom! Tom has the ring. I'll have to call him now . . .'

'Tom has the ring?' Lindsay said slowly.

'Of course Tom has the ring. Tom's going to be the best man. We fixed it all, *weeks* ago. The Ulanov manoeuvre – you pin the queen with a bishop and knight – he *said* your game always collapsed immediately. What am I going to *do*? The honeymoon – I'd forgotten about a honeymoon. Oh God, I'm so happy. This is a disaster. What's my father going to think? He'll never forgive me for this. He adores you. He'll think I've behaved appallingly. *Appallingly* . . .'

'Why don't we go and see?' Lindsay said, rising. 'Why don't we go and tell him? And yes, I can walk there, dearest Colin, and yes, I might even be strong enough to marry you tomorrow. I feel amazingly strong, and well. Pregnancy isn't an *illness*, Colin.'

'Pregnancy! Pregnancy! Oh, what a wonderful, glorious word,' cried Colin, hitting his head on a beam again. 'With child. My child. I love you so much. Let me get your coat, and a scarf, you'd better wear a scarf. Lindsay, I can see for a thousand miles. I can move mountains. I can perform wonders . . .'

'Well, yes. So it would seem . . .'

 Lindsay smiled.

'I'm frightened. I'm happier than I've ever been in my life, and I'm afraid.' Colin fell to his knees and pressed his face gently against her stomach. He began to kiss her woolly skirt, the waistband of which Lindsay, with pride and excitement, had let out for the first time

that morning. She rested her hands on his hair, her head full with the love she felt for him. Then, gently, she drew him to his feet.

She allowed herself to be wrapped up like a parcel in layers and layers of unnecessary but loving protective clothing, then they set off for Shute. On the track Colin was armed with a glorious optimism; by the time he reached the wood, he felt he might not be worth anything. Crossing the deer park, he felt he might be, if Lindsay could help him.

Colin went into his father's study alone to break the news to him. His expression was anxious; Lindsay waited and communed with Colin's dogs, stroking their rough fur and their elegant muzzles.

Colin came out after some considerable time, his expression astonished. It seemed that Colin's father was so soldierly, so old school, so imbued with a lifetime's belief that a man under no circumstances showed emotion, that he behaved in a way Colin could never have foreseen. He had said, 'By Jove,' – his only oath – several times. Several times he had remarked that he was so surprised that Colin could have knocked him down with a feather. He had begun on a few terse remarks about man's estate and his son's future responsibilities, frowning fiercely, his moustache bristling. Then, breaking off, he had embraced his son; much coughing, turning away, the blowing of his nose had not been able to disguise the fact that he was weeping.

It was bad enough that Colin should witness his father's weakness; for Lindsay to witness it was unthinkable. When she would be coming out to her, Colin said, in a few moments, when he had regained his composure. His parting shot to Colin had been, 'Damn good thing you're making an honest woman of her tomorrow. Left it a bit late by *my* standards. Luckily for you, she's an honest woman already. Knew it straight off. First second I laid my eyes on her.'

Colin's father regarded this remark as a witticism of Wildean elegance. So pleased with it was he that he was to repeat it to Colin, at intervals, for some years to come. Being of the old school, it was not a witticism, needless to say, which he would have dreamed of expressing to his daughter-in-law to be, he said in a gruff way that she was a good woman for taking this son of his off his hands. 'By Jove,' he added, coughing again, 'I thought I'd never get shot of him . . .'

Lindsay smiled and kissed the old man, the kiss causing him to suffer severe bronchial disturbance; he bolted from the room immediately.

Lindsay was very touched by this. A sojourn here was teaching her, she felt, the value of certain conventions.

So the wedding passed off the next day, happily, and without untoward incident, at a small registry office in Oxford. Tom remembered the ring and attended the ceremony with Cressida-from-upstairs on his arm, having discovered that Cressida, a sensible girl, had a way of making Katya forgettable. This discovery he had made with a little assistance from Colin, who had suggested one day in Yorkshire that this friend of Tom's might like to come up to watch a day's filming; of this assistance, Tom remained unaware, for Colin was subtle.

Colin's father attended, and - while not disgracing himself with tears - blew his nose loudly and continuously throughout the ceremony. Pixie attended, looking formidable and smiling pityingly. Lindsay's difficult mother arrived late, but was there, and remarked only a few times, as she clasped her headmaster husband's arm, that she was glad to see her daughter at last following her own example. Rowland McGuire, unable to attend because of work commitments, sent excellent champagne, his love, and a telegram which, when read out by Tom, was agreed by

everyone to be very dry, very witty, rather *risqué*, but very Rowland.

Lindsay wore a whitish ensemble bought in a great rush that morning, a blue garter borrowed from Pixie, and a ring – an *old* ring, Colin's father assured her – which had once belonged to Colin's mother. It was a beautiful ring, and although Lindsay believed Colin when he said its stones were very ordinary garnets, she also knew beyond a doubt that they were rubies.

Markov telephoned at intervals throughout the day, requiring updates on everyone's precise degree of happiness; he contrived to conceal his deep affection for Lindsay beneath remarks which, as usual, were both affected and waspish.

Mellowing slightly by the time of his final call to Shute, he announced he had decided it was time he made an honest man of Jippy. He was starting to plan a marriage ceremony somewhere suitably charming, such as Big Sur, or Las Vegas. Signing off, he informed both Colin and Lindsay that they had his lover to thank for their present state of bliss. Jippy, he added, sent them both – or, rather, sent them *all* – his blessings.

It was that night in New York, much affected by that day's events in England, which he had watched from afar, that Jippy began dreaming.

These dreams, which first came to him that night, and continued for some nights afterwards, came to him when he was lying beside Markov, in a state between waking and sleeping. In these dreams, he discovered, he watched present and future with a steady tranquillity. This form of precognition had never happened to him before and he much preferred it to those flashes and flickerings which had previously constituted his clairvoyance.

In these dreams, he found, he could watch over those he loved, such as Lindsay and Colin; he could watch

them and others, with engagement, yet with distance. He could feel, as he watched, pity, fear and compassion, yet he no longer wished to intervene: he no longer had that painful need to seek to spare and protect; he no longer attempted to pull the invisible strings he saw manipulating this universe. He watched and accepted these inevitabilities.

And so he saw, in these nights of dreaming, that the outcome for others was less benevolent than it had been for Lindsay and Colin. He watched the director Tomas Court complete a movie which, from start date to final cut, was almost the same length of time in gestation as a baby. Nine months, and the visions Court had seen in his mind, those ghosts, were fixed upon celluloid. Tomas Court, with whom Jippy felt a certain fellowship, moved on to his next movie. Jippy could see that ultimately his health would fail him; he could see, meanwhile, that the loving war – or warring love – with his wife was still continuing.

Jippy watched this man and this woman and their son at a ranch in Montana, near Glacier. Then, with some reluctance, he scanned away from them, moving off on his dream thermals, to look at another man, woman and son, whose future lay, clear as a lake, spread out to his view below him. He watched Pascal Lamartine meet a fate that had dogged his footsteps for many years, and which Jippy had seen plucking at his sleeve that Thanksgiving night at the Plaza.

It could only have gone one way, the dreaming Jippy felt, and he sensed that this person, who had been waiting for Lamartine so long, was someone Lamartine himself had been seeking. He might have taken many forms, this person, and he might have issued forth in the course of almost any war, in any country. It could have been Beirut, or Mozambique, or Bosnia; it proved to be a small town of little importance in Sri Lanka. The instrument was not a mine or a bomb, as it might have

been, but a boy – a frightened boy, toting a scavenged rifle, who fired out of panic and confusion, as Lamartine raised his camera.

The boy, horrified to see the realities of guns for the first time, bent over the body and touched the blood with a wondering finger. He had not quite believed, until that moment, how easy it was to kill a man, and he had not foreseen that a killing could happen so very quickly. He looked at the eyes of this stranger, which were glazing, then ran away, hid, prayed to his gods and vomited. Later, astonished that this event had been so simple and that he had survived it, the boy came to boast of his feat. He added embellishments; he fictionalized it. And dreaming Jippy, sorrowing for the dead man, sorrowing for the boy, saw that this fictionalizing, like the death, was inevitable and unremarkable. Similar things happened every second of every day and, sensing their clamour, dreaming Jippy moved onwards.

He watched the consequences of this event, which he had only been able to glimpse before, and now saw through his dark glass clearly. Lamartine's wife was graceful in her widowhood, assiduous to her son's welfare, and assiduous in preserving her dead husband's memory. Some years later, she married an American – a man old enough to be her father, her friends said – whom she had first encountered at her father's funeral.

Was she happy then? Jippy did not stay to watch over her future happiness or lack of it. He moved off again on his thermals, which were swifter and more powerful than a jet plane. He could have paused in his dreamings in a thousand places; travelling on, he could feel their stories rising up at him. Sorrows drifted up like smoke as he passed, but Jippy, a kind man, wanted benevolence, so he moved on and on, pausing only when he was in its vicinity.

So it was that Jippy saw Dr Miriam Stark return home one day from her women's college, her mind pre-occupied with thoughts of Rowland. She was a woman who lived her life by rules, and one of those rules – to let no man come close to her – she was beginning to fear she had broken.

On a summer's evening, heavy with the scent of roses, she let herself into the small house to which she had refused Rowland admittance. It was situated in that part of Oxford where a confluence of rivers and a canal create small packages of land; her house, looking out over water, filled with the sounds of water, was virtually moated. This house, quiet, scholarly, calming and familiar, she found both unchanged and changed that evening. Its rooms, as always, were orderly, but she could not look at them, as she usually did, with serenity.

She had done *wrong*, she felt; she had done *wrong* to create this cool, quiet, virginal enclave. She walked through its peaceful rooms with a sense of mounting perturbation; in her sitting-room, with its books and its French windows opening onto the garden, she found her son; he had fallen asleep on a couch. He was still wearing his tennis clothes – he had been playing tennis with friends all afternoon – and his racquet lay beside him. He had a book on his knees, and in front of him, switched off, was a television bought by Miriam and rarely watched by either of them.

This boy was fourteen, now approaching his fifteenth birthday. When awake, he had the clumsiness and awkwardness of any adolescent, but asleep, he was beautiful. Miriam stood there for some while, looking down at him. He was sprawled full-length, his long golden limbs stretched out, with the easy grace of some youth, some Adonis in a Renaissance painting. His head was tilted back, exposing the line of his throat; his face was flushed from the sun and his

hair, in need of cutting, curled with a girlish gleam around his neck and forehead.

He was going to be as tall as his father was; he had his father's hair, his father's features and his father's extraordinary eyes; this beauty was inherited. In the past, watching it form, Miriam had regretted this; she had tried to make herself blind to it. She had wanted to have this child as her child only, and she had wanted to have the part his father had played in his making. It was after all, the most minimal possible – the fatherhood here came about as a result of chance, a chance calculation, a copulation neither partner had intended to take place, which, afterwards, had dismayed both of them.

The Rowland McGuire of that time was a very different man to the one she had remet recently: he had been more markedly arrogant, less scrupulous and more impatient. He was making a career for himself, as she was, and shortly after their one night together, he was to take up the first of his postings in America. She, when he had left, glad he need not threaten her equilibrium, had continued to write her book. When, two months later, having heard nothing from Rowland McGuire in the interim, she discovered she was pregnant, she felt a fierce angry pride rise up in her; she would have died sooner than inform him.

So she had brought up her boy alone, without male aid, and this too she took pride in. She felt scorn at the need other women seemed to have for male companionship, finance and protection. She needed none of it. This scorn, and this shrinking from the male sex, from men who conquered and colonized females with strength and ease and such carelessness, remained with her. She wanted a lover only occasionally, and she hated the idea of a husband.

So she did not regret her past actions; she did not let one instant believe in, or wish for, any future for hers

and Rowland. Certainly not; yet still there was that sense, that perturbing sense of her own wrongdoing. Rowland McGuire now mourned his single state and mourned his childlessness; this boy, she saw, was not solely her possession.

And so, later that night, when her son was in bed and asleep, a dreaming Jippy watched her pace her room, then, with reluctance, breaking off then recommencing, begin to write a letter. Jippy watched her pen move across the paper; he watched the black ink flow. Words, words, words. It was late, very late, before she finished the letter.

Did she send it? Jippy saw her carry it as far as the front door of her house; he watched her hesitate. Then his air thermals lifted him away, to a house in London, a house overlooking a Hawksmoor church, the spire of which could be seen from its main bedroom. Rowland McGuire did not sleep, he saw; watching him, Jippy felt he might act, or he might not act. He might receive the letter, or, not receiving it, be told its contents in some other fashion, on some other occasion. In his dreamings, Jippy, who was soft-hearted and given to optimism, bestowed on this scholarly woman and this solitary man, a wish for a benign resolution. He stayed to see Rowland McGuire open his shutters to the morning and pick up the telephone – then he moved on for the last of his visitations.

High summer still and he found himself in – ah yes, a hospital. There, his Lindsay, his dear Lindsay, and his good Colin, were watching on a black and white ultrasound screen, for the small fist, the foetal shape of their unborn baby.

The ultrasound operator, a young woman used to the emotionalities of these moments, kept her eyes on the screen as she moved her magical device across Lindsay's bared stomach. Lindsay, as she never stopped telling everyone, was very large, was hugely pregnant, was

carrying about a giant of a baby. This baby, limbering up for birth, gave her permanent and acute indigestion. He or she never appeared to sleep, but was ceaselessly and exhaustingly active. He or she liked to calm down a little in the evenings, and wait for the moment when Lindsay hauled herself into bed with Colin. Then, just when they were curved together like two spoons, in a state of the most peaceful contentment, this baby would remind them of its presence. It would punch, kick, roll, somersault, perform uterine headstands. This baby was a wrestler, a boxer, a gymnast; this baby was a Judo black belt, and it was working on its foetal karate.

Both Colin and Lindsay, needless to say, were immensely proud of these feats. They would complain, and they did complain, but they did so while exchanging glances of marital and parental complicity. Both were clear that their baby was unique; no other baby in the history of the world had ever manifested such prowess, such interesting characteristics. Colin, desperate for sleep, drugged with exhaustion, could still roll over at three in the morning and, with an expression of wonderment, rest his face or his hands against his wife's stomach, so that he could feel the miracle of these kickings and strugglings.

Now, holding Lindsay's hand very tightly, Colin fixed his eyes on the screen. Science took him on an odyssey into the interior of the womb – and he found it was the strangest of journeys. He had expected this interior world to resemble the diagrams in the pregnancy textbooks he now consulted twenty times a day. But this world, he found, resembled none of the maps and sketches in those textbooks. What he saw resembled a canyon, a moonscape, or some deep trench under the ocean. He could see shapes that might have been rivers, rocks, or chasms, but none of these shapes was fixed; there was constant flux and movement; there were

'I don't *believe* it. I *told* that doctor. I *knew* I couldn't be this big with just one in there. Oh, Colin . . .'

'The girl's the smaller – as is usually the way,' the operator continued, frowning at the screen. 'She has a powerful kick though – look at that. And she's been hiding herself away behind her brother. They do that sometimes. Well now, Mrs Lascelles, are we excited? *Isn't* that a lovely surprise? I – Mrs Lascelles, is your husband all right? He looks rather pale . . .'

Colin heard these words from a great distance. They were small fuzzy words, receding from him fast. The room, beginning to tilt, was not recognizing the usual rules of the universe. Intent on not disgracing himself, he sat down on a small hard chair, and stared at the wall. He was a father now – no more tears, he told himself, and certainly no faintings.

He looked at the joy in the room. He could sense a cluster, a *preponderance* of angels. He wanted to embrace Lindsay and the operator who had been the harbinger here. He wanted to cry aloud, to voice some great, thankful cry of hope, promise and jubilation. He sprang to his feet and embraced his wife, who was struggling to sit up and weeping.

The operator, with a quiet tact, left them alone together. Colin, holding his wife in his arms, seeing her tears, rested his hands over the tautness and stretch of his wife's stomach. Feeling his karate babies kick out, he knew beyond question, knew without a second's doubt, that grace existed, and grace had been bestowed on them.

Their silent watcher, Jippy, cocooned in his dreamings, knew this too. He watched a little longer and a little longer, until he was sure these babies were safely born. They were. He found he could relinquish his dreamings now. Recalling his spell, that orange and those two eggs, he sighed. His powers were greater than he had realized, he thought; in the future, he would have

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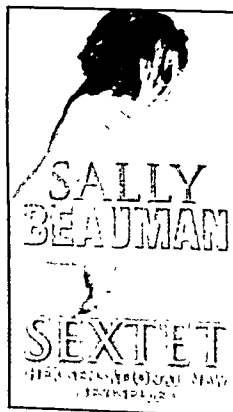
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